

ADRIFT in the ARCTIC



THE OXFORD BOOKS FOR BOYS

The author of this book has had experience of the Arctic; not otherwise could he have succeeded in giving such a vivid impression of its loneliness and desolation, its numbing cold, the brooding darkness of its three-months' night, and, withal, its flashes of beauty. The story deals with the adventures of a party of young men who sail with Captain Frazer to explore an expanse of uncharted sea in the far north. The ship is blown away in a storm while the captain and most of the crew are ashore, and the boys are left to work her alone. They are driven far to the north, and, unable to get back owing to the ice, they spend the winter in a cavern hewn out of a glacier, where they make a discovery of the greatest importance, both to themselves and to the world.

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ADRIFT IN THE
ARCTIC



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THE STORM.

[See Chapter V.]

ADrift IN THE ARCTIC

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CHAPTER I

THE PROPOSITION

IN the corners of the railway compartment two boys reclined at ease, lazily regarding the ebb and flow of schoolmates who had not yet found accommodation in the more crowded portions of the train. It was the eve of the Easter holidays, and on the platform groups of boys, inseparable during term-time, were breaking up and re-forming into travelling parties united only by common residence in some more or less remote quarter of England.

Peter Hunter, a stocky, fair-haired, indolent youth of sixteen, sat up with sudden interest and leaned forward.

‘Hullo! here’s Dicky and old Frazer. They come our way. I wonder if they’ll come in here.’

Tony Fielding, the lad opposite, ceasing to stroke an imaginary moustache, twisted his wiry body round to catch a glimpse of the two seniors, who moved leisurely among the seething rabble of small fry on the platform. They paused before the door, looked to left and right, then Frazer turned the handle and they entered. Peter drew up his legs to let them pass. Dicky, otherwise Richard Thorpe, had led the school pack for the last two terms, and

already had the build of an international; Frazer was school captain. Both were leaving now, and had taken their farewell as boys of the old grey buildings.

They moved to the vacant corners and subsided. 'Your ankle come all right again, Fielding?' asked Frazer.

Tony nodded. 'Yes, quite fit, thank you.'

His position in the team at scrum-half gave him a confidence lacking in the less athletic, and for the moment slightly overawed, Peter.

'I'm sorry we won't play together again,' Tony added.

The conversation was general for a time, but after the train moved out the seniors gradually drew together and became absorbed in a topic of their own. In the fitful rush and roar their voices were blurred, and only fragmentary sentences came here and there to the younger boys. With his eyes carelessly on the flying landscape without, Tony Fielding was formulating plans for the coming three weeks, when something caught his attention.

It was a word dropped by Frazer, a word encountered scores of times in tales of adventure, but never before spoken in his hearing, a word which, in the grimy compartment and sooty atmosphere, conjured up voyages of romance, remote

The Proposition

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seas, exotic islands, and an almost unknown race of men. It was the word *binnacle*.

Tony was startled, and without a thought of eavesdropping, began to strain his ears for more of the magic. It came, in unsatisfactory snatches. 'Dry dock—fetching the galley on deck—shouldn't wonder if the old man sails without a second mate this time—bottom dredging—Shetlands, then north-east to the Norwegian coast.'

A glance at Hunter showed him to be similarly engaged, and seeing his rapt expression, Tony had a momentary twinge of conscience. But after a time the train slowed up, and Frazer's words came unsought and distinct.

'Pater's having a set of winter canvas made for this trip. He says we may get bad weather up north in May or June. He's converting her from schooner to brigantine for deep-sea work—always has wanted to try her square rigged. Of course it'll make her slow to windward, but easier in a sodger's breeze. So, my boy, you'll have to lay out on the yards, as in the good old days. What ho!'

Two hours passed during which the March dusk changed to darkness. With farewell handshakes, Dicky and Frazer alighted, leaving behind them a ferment of excitement and envy.

'Gosh! what do you think of that?' said Peter.

'Those two going to spend the summer careering about the North Atlantic, while we're stopping balls at the nets!'

'I'm not thinking about it,' said Tony darkly. 'I've got a scheme. I'm going with them.' His eyes grew vivid. 'I've met Captain Frazer, a great old boy, retired sea captain and merchant and that sort of thing. He came down to some of the matches last autumn. I'll ask him to take me.'

'Rot! you can't.'

'I can. My guardian says no boy's education is finished until he has sniffed the briny. He'll fix it with Captain Frazer.'

Peter was incredulous.

'Honest?'

'Honest!'

'Then you might work it for me as well.'

Tony grew grave. 'The Head would never let us both go.'

It was Peter's turn.

'Yes, he would. You heard what Frazer said about dredging and zoological observations and so on. You know I'm taking up that kind of thing. It might work.'

Lost in the idea, the usually irrepressible Peter was silent, while the train jolted over the points on the outskirts of a large town.

‘But I say,’ he broke out at length, ‘wouldn’t it be frightful cheek, inviting yourself and that sort of thing?’

Tony shook his head.

‘I’m going to have a stab at it anyhow. It’s not just a yachting cruise. They’re going to do sounding and so on which makes it a kind of expedition. Our work would be worth our keep anyway.’

‘Go on! You don’t know anything about sailing—or dredging for that matter.’

‘Can learn,’ responded Tony laconically.

The train drew up, and for five minutes the boys thought of nothing but extricating their luggage and bullying porters. Before parting Tony said,

‘Look here, young feller. If you want to come, get your people’s leave and roll round to-morrow afternoon.’

A moment later he disappeared in a whirl of petrol fumes.

At breakfast, three mornings later, Captain Frazer was frowning over a heap of correspondence littered about the breakfast table: shipchandlers’ lists, invoices covering a range of articles from cup-hooks to bolts of canvas, offers of proprietary foods specially adapted for seafarers, a booklet on a new patent log.

‘I’ll have to send to Copenhagen for that sea-

water sampling gear,' he remarked to his son. 'It's not to be had in this country. I hope we're not held up waiting for it.'

He scanned a letter addressed in a large square hand.

'Here's a long growl from Deacon on the *Widgeon*. To read it you'd think he was the most wretched mate that ever looked after a ship in dock, and I'll bet he's having the time of his life. Only once have I seen Deacon look pleased, and that was when we were hove to in the Bay, with every other comber threatening to finish us.'

'What's his trouble?' John asked with a smile, looking up from an illustrated catalogue.

'It's the alterations on the foremast. They're having no end of trouble with the lead of the braces, and Deacon says the davits will need to be brought aft six feet to clear the bunt of the foresail. He also says he wants me to go down for a day—to give me a chance of agreeing with him, I suppose.'

Fifteen years previous to this time, when his favourite command, and the last sailing ship belonging to his owners, was broken up, Captain Frazer had left the sea, vowing that he would never walk the bridge of any craft propelled by steam. The firm in whose service he had spent a

quarter of a century was an old-fashioned one, and its principals held him in high personal regard; rather than sever the long-standing connexion they offered him an appointment ashore, which the seafarer accepted, not without reluctance. As time went on the business prospered and with it the affairs of the now junior partner, but the outbreak of war saw the retired captain at sea once more, first in the power-driven craft which he hated, but finally in command of a mystery-ship, a fine old three-masted barque. Two months before the armistice Mrs. Frazer died, and on demobilization the captain found that living ashore had lost any attractions it had ever held for him.

All his life he had been a keen student of marine biology, and it occurred to him that with the fortune he now possessed he might make some contribution to the science of the sea. Accordingly, he had purchased the *Widgeon*, and put himself under instruction at a leading school of oceanography, gradually becoming a master in his chosen field. Now at the age of fifty-five his work as a collector of specimens was well recognized in scientific circles, and even to the public the name of the *Widgeon* was not unknown. But sitting here at table with his keen eyes and weather-beaten face, he still looked the man of action rather

than the student, the seaman rather than the scientist.

He worked down through the pile of letters, discarding some, putting others away for consideration, making a little bunch for immediate attention. The last envelope he opened absently, and, with the single sheet of notepaper in his hand, his expression passed from vague interest to surprise, then to astonishment.

‘By Jove! What’s this?’

Captain Frazer’s eyes twinkled.

‘I say John, listen to this:

“By an overt act, it has come to the notice of the undersigned that you are fitting out a vessel for a voyage of adventure in the North Atlantic Ocean. Being not unmindful of the hardships of such a cruise, but rather careless of them, we feel bound to offer ourselves as volunteers if there be any position vacant, however menial. The following is a list of our qualifications.”’

Captain Frazer broke off in a roar of laughter which continued till the tears ran down his cheeks. When he recovered himself and dried his eyes, he passed the letter to his son.

‘That’s pretty rich. I’ve half a mind to look up the youngsters. You know them, of course?’

John nodded. ‘Tony Fielding and Peter Hunter.

Yes—bosom pals. Tony's as tough as they make 'em, wiry and quiet. You met him once, I think. Peter's more the good-natured type, a bit of a wag. They must have overheard Dicky and me in the train.'

He paused.

'I say, Pater, would you consider taking them?'

Captain Frazer, serious once more, balanced his teaspoon on the cup.

'I hadn't thought of such a thing. It would take some readjustment.'

He was silent awhile.

'Nothing jollier than a crowd of youngsters. I trust your judgement, John. They're good lads?'

'I'll vouch for them.'

'H'm. They could have the little cabin abreast of the midships companion. It's dark but it would do.'

'What about school?'

Captain Frazer smiled. 'I think that could be arranged. What I like about the idea is that it might help Cecil a bit. He'll find things strange enough in all conscience, and they're just about his age. You and Dicky might be a bit—h'm—ponderous.'

John laughed. 'Dicky's a hefty beggar if that's what you mean.'

Captain Frazer resumed. 'I've been wondering if I ought to look round for another hand. The *Widgeon* as a brigantine will be heavier to handle than she was as a schooner. Now, your two young friends between them—Yes, my son, write and ask them to step along, and we'll look 'em over.'

CHAPTER II

THE SHIP

ONE bright spring day in the middle of April two boys jumped eagerly from the train at Southampton West Station, and demanded of the ticket-collector where the docks were.

'Tony, you benighted owl! I told you it was the other station. We're miles from the sea. The ticketman says we'd better hurry along as the *Aquitania* sails at eleven prompt. Standing room only. I reckon he was jesting.'

'Don't you believe it. I wonder if there's a taxi about.'

At the dock gates a policeman stopped them. 'The *Widgeon*? Yes. Follow along to the right, and mind the shunting engines.'

They left the taxi and walked. As the end of each warehouse revealed a new expanse of water ruffled by the fresh north-west breeze, they scanned the shipping anxiously.

'By Jove! I hope she hasn't sunk,' said Peter, as they came to the last basin. He addressed a bystander.

'The *Widgeon*? That's her over there between them two freighters.'

Peter gasped. 'I didn't think they built ships as small as that, except pulling boats.'

Tucked away as she was, the brigantine indeed looked insignificant, but when the boys came abreast of her and looked up at the tapering masts, they reconsidered their opinion.

A little over one hundred feet in length, the *Widgeon* was a sturdy craft whose solidity and strength were apparent even to the uninitiated boys. Although she had seen much service before being purchased by Captain Frazer, her oak timbers, grown and fashioned in England, were as sound as on the day of her launch. Her black sides, unbroken save for a narrow line of gold, gleamed in the bright spring sunshine and caught the reflections from the wavelets which danced around her; above the white figurehead the bowsprit rose upwards in a long gracious sweep, softened by the tracery of ropes that clothed it.

The boys gazed at her entranced, at the line of her bulwarks, the tall glistening spars freshly scraped and oiled, the arching cutwater, the intriguing devices of ropes and blocks whose purpose was as yet a sealed book.

'Say, old son, have you got it? We're going in her. Going to steer her. See her in bad weather.

Sleep in her. Anchor her in all sorts of places, Shetland, Norway, the Faroes maybe.'

Tony waxed eloquent.

'And be seasick over her sides,' Peter broke in. 'I'll never know what all these ropes are for.'

John Frazer, standing by the little wheelhouse, beckoned them to come on board. Tony jumped into the rigging and swung himself on deck. Peter, more cautious, went down the gangway. They made their way aft, where John shook them heartily by the hand.

'Well, what do you think of her?'

'We think, first of all,' said Tony, 'that it's extraordinarily decent of your guv'nor.'

'The appalling cheek of it——' began Peter.

'I shouldn't trouble about that. If the old man hadn't taken to you, no amount of cheek would have been any use. Hullo! there's a case of coffee for us. Stores coming on board. That's my job. Have a look round for yourselves. The mate's for'ard by the windlass. Don't talk to him—to-day.'

John hurried off with a bunch of invoices and a pencil in his hand. Everywhere was bustle and activity. The decks, strewn with ropes, casks, tarpaulins, and all manner of gear, were a veritable chaos. Aloft, men moving about the network of

cordage shouted orders to those below, while a huge spar, swinging in tackles, slowly rose upwards. Forward, under the superintendence of the mate, a heavy cable was disappearing through a pipe in the deck.

Peter moved to the fife-rail.

'This now is a belaying-pin.'

'What do you know about it. I'll bet you don't know a belaying-pin from a rolling-pin.'

Peter drew himself up with dignity and was preparing to make a speech, when he noticed that the mate was eyeing him and subsided suddenly. 'Last summer my uncle took me on board the *Cutty Sark* in Falmouth. These ropes are called shrouds.'

Disgusted by so much knowledge, Tony walked away to examine the wheel and compass. The wheelhouse was an innovation (strongly combated by the mate, who held that such steamboat practice was wholly out of place on a sailing ship), and two shipwrights were still at work putting the finishing touches to the structure. Standing inside among the shavings which littered the floor, Tony tried hard to picture the vessel at sea, but failed.

Presently John called the two boys below. They went down the steep ladder aft, leading directly into the snug little saloon where, in contrast to

the litter on deck, everything was spick and span and orderly. Cushioned seats, moulded to the shape of the hull, ran round the sides; under the skylight and above the table hung a barometer, and a clock which ticked with sailorly smartness; whilst upright against the bulkhead a large closed stove gave a cosy air to the whole cabin.

‘There’s no place like home,’ sighed Peter, throwing himself down on the leather cushion. ‘These spells ashore make me tired. I remember in ’Frisco in the early nineties when the crew were all down with scurvy——’

‘Shut up, you chump! I say, Frazer, what day do we sail?’

‘To-morrow week. All hands to be on board by six o’clock the night before.’

Peter jumped up. ‘Where do we sleep—have our watch below, I mean?’

John opened a door and stepped into an alleyway which led forward. On either side were a number of tiny state-rooms. At the foremost of these, at a point where another ladder led to the deckhouse amidships, John turned a handle.

‘That’s your den.’

Peter examined the two bunks ranged one above the other; the cabin as yet contained no other fittings.

'I had been expecting a hammock this voyage. Mine's the top one, Tony.'

'You're right,' replied his cabin-mate. 'Who wants to climb up there when she's rolling, or fall out, for that matter?'

'Climbing'll be easy enough with my foot on your chest,' Peter chuckled. 'As good as a spring-board.'

'This is the ship's laboratory,' said John from the doorway opposite. 'All the specimens we find are stored here, pickled in these bottles.'

He waved his hand towards the rows of shelves which lined the walls, and which held hundreds of specimen jars of all shapes and sizes. In receptacles on the floor stood Winchester bottles of alcohol and formalin.

At the table a boy of sixteen was stooping over a microscope.

'Hullo! here's Marchmont. Come and be introduced to your shipmates.'

Somewhat awkwardly, the boy came forward and shook hands with Tony and Peter. The latter, usually impetuous and friendly, was a little damped by Marchmont's constraint, and when they were once more in the saloon remarked to Tony, 'A queer fish, our new friend.'

John, whose hearing was remarkably acute, turned to Peter.

‘You’re right. Marchmont is a queer fish. But all the same, I hope you fellows will hit it off with him. And don’t try to size him up too quickly.’

Cecil Marchmont’s inclusion in the ship’s company had come about in a vastly different way from that of Peter and Tony. Only son of a zoologist of some note, his boyhood had been spent mainly in the company of his father and a tutor. The tutor, a man of quiet and studious habits, far from encouraging the boy to mix with his fellows, had fostered his inclination to retire into himself and to find his world in books. The sequel had come one day when the zoologist, happening to glance at his son from an unusual angle, discovered that he was developing a stoop. A second glance revealed pale features and eyes which might soon become short-sighted.

Genuinely alarmed, Dr. Marchmont spent some days in careful deliberation; then, with his mind made up, called on Captain Frazer, whose acquaintance he had made some years before.

‘If you are kind enough to take him with you,’ he concluded, ‘keep him on deck as much as you can. He’ll gravitate naturally towards the laboratory where he’s at home and can be useful. But I want you to make a sailor of him, or at any rate, as much of a sailor as one can become in four

months. 'There's nothing organically wrong with the lad.'

'Hand, reef, and steer, eh? Or navigation and astronomy?'

'Hand, reef, and steer, by all means, so long as he's out in the air and exercising.'

A smile came to Captain Frazer's brown face.

'He'll be out in the air all right, don't worry.'

And so it had been arranged. To the boy the impending change was not quite distasteful, for deep down he was not without his natural love of adventure, but his mistrust of his untried physical powers, and the life of seclusion he had led, gave him a manner which was far from disarming.

Later on, when they were alone, Peter remarked to Tony,

'We've jolly well got to be decent to the kid after the way we've butted in on the show.'

Tony agreed. They were sitting swinging their legs from Peter's bunk.

'Anyhow, he's probably all right. He looks like you looked your first day at school, only more intelligent. Yah! you oaf!'

They came down on the floor in a scuffling mass. Just as Peter had established a temporary supremacy, the door opened and the head of the mate appeared for a moment, then withdrew.

'I bet he'll have a down on me,' sighed Peter, getting to his feet ruefully. 'People always get a wrong impression of me.'

'That's so,' replied Tony. 'At a cricket game last year I heard an old lady remark, "What a perfectly angelic-looking boy," as you were walking back after having made a duck. I often think of that. But look here, let's stop scrapping and consider where the jolly sea-chests are to be stowed. Frazer said we can have some shelves fitted if we want them.'

Before they left the ship Captain Frazer, who had come on board with Dicky, called them to the saloon, where the afterguard was assembled. A chart was spread out on the table. Captain Frazer cleared his throat.

'I think a little explanation wouldn't come amiss. Of course you all know roughly the objects of this voyage. On the chart here you will see that I have shaded certain areas. Over these areas the seabottom has been more or less explored. You will notice that little has been done at any distance from the coast. At the end of the summer I hope to be able to shade in a square here,' he pointed with his finger to the north-west of the Lofoten Islands.

'It sounds quite a simple proposition, but as Mr.

Deacon can tell you, it is no easy matter holding a vessel in position in deep water for weeks at a time. At first we may expect some snow and hard going, but in July and August the weather will probably be mild. The route will be Shetland, Tromso, and thence to our ground.'

For a time he paused, drumming on the chart with a pencil.

'Would any of you like to ask questions, or to back out of the business altogether?'

He smiled at the boys' protestations.

'Good. Then we know where we stand. What is it, Fielding?'

'Is there any chance of meeting ice, sir?'

Captain Frazer hesitated. 'Just the possibility of a stray berg or a detached piece of pack-ice. But the long daylight minimizes to a great extent the danger of collision. I don't think you need worry on that score.'

On their way back to the station—the Docks Station this time—Tony was gravely excited.

'I've a hunch that we're going to see some real ice, a feeling in my bones. I wonder how the *Widgeon* would stand it.'

'Dunno, I'm sure. What worries me is that we have a week to put in yet before sailing. But even now I can't realize that we are going. When we

wrote the letter it seemed too hopeless a proposition altogether.'

'Yes. It's rather a shock to be accepted on trust like that. But we *are* going, and the rest of it is up to us.'

They parted at a wayside junction, Tony to spend a few days in London with his guardian, Peter to return to his home.

'I expect I'll burst with bottled-up excitement before I see you again,' said the latter. 'My people take it quite coolly. Think it's only a superior kind of yachting. Little do they reckon!'

CHAPTER III

THE START

‘SLACK off your head-ropes. A man aft to the wheel. Stand by the tow-rope, bo’sun.’

A grey morning sky hung over the dock buildings and still unawakened town, but the air was fresh and invigorating.

‘Let go!’

‘All gone aft!’

‘All gone for’ard, sir.’

The brigantine’s bows swung slowly off the wall, and she began to move ahead.

‘Mr. Deacon, have your starboard anchor ready. Helm amidships!’

‘Midships it is, sir.’

She passed through the dock gates where a group of sleepy labourers were waiting on the bridge. Just outside, the ghost of a swell lifted her bows gently, and the hearts of those on board thrilled to feel the life in her. Then with a strident hoot of warning, the tug quickened her way and the hawser rose from the water, tautened and quivered, and flung off a halo of spray. The brigantine hesitated for a moment, then came to heel.

‘Steady her.’

‘Steady it is, sir.’

Mr. Deacon came aft. ‘Anchor’s ready, sir.’

‘Very good. We shan’t need it now. Be ready to make sail in an hour’s time. Let the hands go to breakfast.’

‘That has a good sound about it,’ said Peter, but for once Tony was too engrossed even to be scornful. The three younger boys were gathered in a knot in the waist of the ship, not quite certain what was expected of them. Frazer, exalted to the rank of second mate and looking after the stern-ropes, had suddenly taken on a very different aspect from the good-humoured school captain of a month ago; even Dicky knew enough to be able to lend his not inconsiderable weight at the right moment; but Peter, jumping in to give a hand, became mixed up with a running rope and was ordered to keep clear, and the other two, profiting by his experience, waited for instructions before moving. It was a relief when John came along and shepherded them below.

‘You wait a bit and you’ll get plenty to do. We’re going on watch and watch for a start, four hours on and four hours off. You’ll find it hard enough.’

Beyond Calshot the fresh south-west breeze began to make the brigantine lively, and Captain

Frazer gave the signal. For half an hour the boys worked in complete bewilderment, pulling ropes here, there, and everywhere, under the mate's direction. When they had time to look round the tug was already far astern, and the ship, heeling over to port, was nodding and curtsying under all sail.

After a short colloquy with Captain Frazer, Mr. Deacon called all hands aft to pick the watches. Dicky was chosen by Frazer along with the bo'sun, Hendry, and an Irish sailor named Kenaud. Peter, Tony, and Marchmont found themselves in the mate's watch, with the other two seamen, Mills and Wilson. As the ship came into Spithead the water grew smooth again and the boys could get about the decks with ease. There was a triumphant gleam in Peter's eye.

'Never felt better in my life, old son. Now Marchmont looks a bit green about the gills, don't you think?'

Marchmont smiled. 'I feel all right.'

From his tiny galley amidships Roberts, the cook, was regarding the trio askance.

'What price some lunch,' sang out Peter.

'Why, it's just gone four bells. 'Taters ain't scrubbed yet.'

Tony consulted his watch. 'By Jove! only ten o'clock. It's ages till grub time.'

'I'll tell you when it's ready,' said the cook, retiring thoughtfully to stoke up his fire. An hour later, clear of the Isle of Wight, a little spray fell on the decks.

'I say, look at that!' said Peter. A channel sea moved towards them and lifted the hull with an abrupt motion. Caught unawares by the rising bulwarks, the boys lost balance and slithered down the deck to the house. A few seconds later the returning lurch sent them willy-nilly back to the rail, where they hung on with a certain grimness.

'This won't do,' said Peter vaguely. He had a curious feeling of physical instability which he sought in vain to conceal from himself. Another sudden roll brought an unmistakable pang.

'I say——' he began.

Tony paid no heed. He was staring fixedly at the distant Sussex coast as though it were some strange, undiscovered land. The cook came to their elbow.

'Dinner's almost ready now. A nice suet dumpling and——' he dropped his voice confidentially, 'a beautiful piece of fat pork. Nothing like fat pork for settling the stomach. I remember when we was living on seal-blubber how we used to long for it.'

Peter stifled an impulse to put his fingers in his

ears. 'We'd better be getting below,' he said wanly. Uncertainly, in company with Tony, he staggered off, leaving Marchmont to the unctuous reminiscences of the cook. At the top of the companion ladder they paused and looked at each other without much interest.

'We're for it,' said Tony.

They dived below. At the bottom of the ladder Dicky met them and, recognizing the symptoms, helped them silently to their bunks.

After what seemed an eternity of days and nights, Peter was the first to speak.

'Tony, are you there?'

A grunt.

'I thought we were done for,' said Peter in a childlike voice. 'All your fault too. If you hadn't wanted to come on this wretched ship we should have been doing maths. with old "Horseface", or something nice like that.'

He sighed heavily and relapsed into silence. By and by Frazer looked in.

'Feeling a bit better? She's going along quite easy now. We've made a fine run of it.'

'Was it a storm?' asked Peter.

'Not by a long chalk. Just a fresh breeze. I'll send Roberts along with some tea. You'll pick up much quicker once you're on deck, I expect.'

Presently the cook arrived, and Peter managed to swallow a couple of mouthfuls.

‘I say, Tony.’ No answer.

‘It’s all right, Tony, I forgive you.’ He chuckled feebly. ‘Don’t let it prey on your mind, old man; you meant well.’

The occupant of the lower bunk stirred suddenly and a dark tousled head appeared. Tony reached for his clothes and began to get into them. Peter waited till he had almost finished dressing.

‘All right, I’m with you. Hold on a bit.’

He lowered himself gingerly on to the floor.

‘By Jove! she has given up those beastly lurches. Ugh! I wonder where we can be. In the Norwegian fiords, do you think?’

Very weak, the boys scrambled up the ladder and looked out on the dry sunlit deck. At the wheel Kenaud was whistling softly to himself, steering with a lazy skill in the light breeze; Frazer had stopped pacing the deck to look through his binoculars at some distant object; by the main rigging Marchmont and the bo’sun, armed with marlin-spikes, were putting splices in a short length of rope, the bo’sun intoning the while, ‘Over one and under one, over one and under one.’

Peter made a grimace of disgust.

'One up for Marchmont,' said Tony in a subdued voice.

'Perhaps he's only just turned out,' Peter opined hopefully. But Marchmont had the confident air of a person who is at one with his interior, and Peter's optimism died away. Following the line of Frazer's glasses, Tony found that they were abreast of a town of some size.

'There's a jolly foreign look about that place. See the church spires and things, and the funny building at the end of the pier?'

At that moment Captain Frazer came out of his little cabin on deck, and greeted the boys.

'All shipshape again, eh?'

'Pretty near it, sir,' replied Tony. 'Aren't we going ashore here?'

The captain looked at him in astonishment.

'Why, what on earth for?'

Tony was embarrassed, but Peter helped him out.

'Where is it, sir?'

'Why, Great Yarmouth. Where did you think?'

The boys were silent, and the captain moved smiling away.

'Now we're marked out as a pair of chumps as well as greenhorns,' said Tony gloomily.

'All right. Cheer up. We'll show 'em yet. Now, if we went aloft and took in 'a sail or two——'

But the evening breeze was steady and hardly seemed likely to offer any heroic opportunities. The ship's cat meandered past, sprang on to the pin-rail and began to lick herself, glancing indolently at the shore from time to time. In the peaceful atmosphere the boys recovered rapidly, and by suppertime the idea of eating had regained some attraction. Seated in the snug little saloon, they learned that Marchmont had never had a qualm, that Dicky had been ill but had turned out regularly for his watch, that the ship had almost been rammed by a Union Castle liner the night before, off Dover.

Apparently Captain Frazer had forgotten Tony's geographical weakness, for he made no mention of it, and after the meal was over, said to Mr. Deacon, 'If you can spare these men to-night, I think they had better get a good sleep and report to-morrow for the forenoon watch.' The mate offered no objection and so the matter was left.

Tony and Peter, however, felt little inclination to turn in, and stole away on deck. The coastline had grown more distinct and stood out in dark silhouette against the afterglow of the sunset; here and there on the land lights twinkled, coming and going unaccountably; the breeze had fallen so that the ship moved but leisurely on her course.

Against the weather bulwarks the boys talked in low voices, keenly savouring the sense of strangeness in their surroundings.

Presently they were joined by Dicky who was on watch. Bulkier than ever in the gloom, he towered beside them, deprecating their admiration for his feat of endurance.

'It all depends how it gets you. Some people lose all their muscular strength, but it hardly affects mine. I feel pretty cheap, but I can do a job just the same. When I got sick aloft, though, the mate ordered me down. He seemed worried.'

'No wonder. What sort of chap is he?' said Peter.

'Good. He knows his job.' This last was the standard which Dicky applied indifferently to all mankind, head-master and labourer alike. The person who knew his job was a 'good man' and deserved and got Dicky's respect and loyalty. Applying the measure to himself, he always found that he came short of it, and, quite without mock humility, included himself with the unworthier section of mankind.

'I mean, does he bully-rag you about?'

'No, not if you step lively.'

'You'll know all about it to-morrow,' chuckled Tony.

In the darkness the ship's bell struck.

'Hullo, four bells. My wheel.'

Dicky walked aft, and the boys could hear the helmsman give the course and Dicky's repetition,

'North by west, a half west.'

Relieved from the wheel, Hendry spat over the side, yawned deeply, and moved off to enjoy a quiet pipe by the fore-rigging. A match flared up between his cupped hands, illumined for an instant the weather-beaten face, then flickered and went out amid a tiny cascade of sparks. Shadowy against the sky, the masts swung to and fro in response to the dying swell. The glow had gone from the west, and the land, enveloped in a low haze, lay faint and mysterious under a setting moon. Not far away a lightship winked solemnly, throwing a dim reflection over the restless sea. Tony drew his hand along the bulwarks. It was wet with dew.

'Time to turn in,' he said.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEA

PROMPT at eight bells next day the boys tumbled out to keep their first watch on deck. The morning was dull with a fresh breeze a point or two on the port quarter, and the brigantine under all canvas was reaching away to the north before a biggish, gathering sea.

Lean faced and alert, the mate kept no one in suspense.

‘Hunter and Wilson to the wheel. Marchmont on the look out, and keep your eyes skinned. Chips, take Fielding with you and overhaul the boat gear. That after chock is a misfit.’

In a twinkling the little group had scattered, and Peter found himself grasping hard at the spokes and almost ready to be sick again at the upflung motion of the stern. But the qualm passed at once and was soon forgotten in the perspiring interest of trying to keep the vessel on her course. On the other side of the wheel Wilson came to his rescue when a wilder yaw threatened some danger to the ship, explaining in a slow, cumbersome speech, which matched ill with his clear-cut knowledge, where the danger lay. The wind was too nearly

dead astern to let her head fall off like that, he said. Mustn't risk a gybe with the weight of wind there was. 'If it backs any further the mate'll take the mains'l off her rather than risk it,' he opined finally.

Peter only vaguely understood what it was all about, but the movement of the compass card in response to the wheel was certain enough, and he strove with all his might to steady the lubber line on the required point. Once a heavy sea, kicking up under the stern and against the rudder, wrenched the wheel so hard that he was pulled right over it and turned a somersault into the sailor's arms. The mate, pacing the deck on the weather side of the house, saw this antic and allowed his features to relax. 'You'll do better on your feet than on your head,' he remarked, with the ghost of a smile.

Somewhat bruised both in body and in self-esteem, Peter regained his position and began again the struggle. At the end of the hour, when his trick was over, he felt little advanced in this new and exacting science of helmsmanship. Wilson's surmise was correct. At two bells the mate called the boys together and told them that the mainsail had to be handed. He explained in detail what was to be done, and finished with an oration which worked itself up into a crescendo of fierceness.

'My watch is always the smartest in this ship, and the sooner you begin to learn, the better. Quick and lively is the word.' He paused. 'When I say walk, you run; and when I say run, you jump; but when I say jump, by Jupiter, you jolly well FLY!'

He took a little turn forward with his hand suspiciously over his moustache, then came back and rapped out an order.

'Heave down on your topping lift. In main-sheet.'

The boys hauled lustily, then slacked away peak and throat, swung the gaff inboard on the vang, and ran the sail down.

'Square the foreyards. Port braces!' And again the boys bent their backs and swigged away until the mate was content and bellowed,

'Belay all!'

At rest for a moment, Peter was beginning to chronicle to Tony his first encounter with the bucking horse in the wheelhouse, but interruption came at once.

'Upper tops'l gaskets are all adrift. Aloft now and make 'em fast.'

The boys moved forward to the rigging, Marchmont lagging perceptibly in the rear. None of them knew what gaskets were, and none of them

was very clear as to which was the upper topsail, but Peter and Tony grasped the port ratlines side by side and began to climb.

‘We’ll go on till he stops us,’ said Tony.

As they ascended the converging rigging, they could no longer proceed abreast and Tony drew ahead. In a few moments he had reached the futtock shrouds, and had to climb outwards on the overhanging ladder. Peter paused to watch the precarious performance, saw his friend suspended above his head, and disappear safely into the fore-top, then looked down at Marchmont. The latter was clinging, wild-eyed, to the shrouds, his face a deathly white, his lips twitching. In a trice Peter was beside him and sang out to the mate,

‘Marchmont’s taken badly, sir.’

The boy made an effort to pull himself together.

‘It’s all right. I’m only dizzy,’ he gasped, but Peter was much relieved when Wilson appeared beside them and helped Marchmont to the deck.

In the meantime, Tony had reached the yard and was lying out on it cautiously. When at length Peter joined him he had found the offending gaskets and was engaged in making them into neat coils. Together the boys perched on the swaying footropes, their bodies flung over the yardarm, all their attention required at times to hold their

position. The ship, relieved of the steadying power of the mainsail, was rolling her scuppers under, now on one side, now on the other, and up aloft here the motion was magnified tenfold. The footropes would suddenly swing forward, threatening to precipitate them backwards into the sea, and as suddenly leap out behind, as though endeavouring to pitch them head-first over the yard. It was Tony who discovered that by resting the weight on the yard and steadying only with the footropes, an easy equilibrium could be maintained.

When all was shipshape, the boys hung on for some minutes to get back breath. Above them, the arched foot of the topgallantsail spanned from yardarm to yardarm in a perfect flowing curve; below, the canvas, bellied out unwaveringly in the steady wind, had the grace of a living creature. Each roll of the hull sent them swaying out in a wide arc, until they hung far over the sea; each sharp recovery made them hold fast as the masts whipped back to the vertical. Straining ropes creaked in the blocks, and their voices echoed queerly in the tight-stretched canvas.

When they had sidled inboard again to the rigging, Tony shouted, 'I'm going to the mast-head,' and without waiting for a reply, swung himself lithely into the shrouds. Peter watched him

anxiously, himself quite content with his present elevation. Tony reached the topgallant yard, then gave pause. The last eight feet was a bare pole, smooth and without footholds. The boy wound himself round it, shinned up until his head was on a level with the gilded truck, then looked downwards at the narrow deck far below. Figures, strangely foreshortened, were moving about between the bulwarks in what seemed, from this airy height, a cramped and confined space. Tony saw Captain Frazer step out of the house, and recollected suddenly that it was his watch on deck.

Five minutes afterwards he was sent to the wheel, and Peter, free for a time, could look about him. He followed out the lead of the ropes which had been handled earlier, and got a glimmering here and there of their use, but the bulk of the cordage was still an enigma to him, and would be so, he felt, for some time to come. Presently Marchmont joined him.

‘Are you feeling all right?’ asked Peter.

‘Yes. But I don’t think I’d ever be much use aloft. I got a helpless kind of sensation, which made me feel that I had to let go and fall backwards.’

‘Jolly rotten,’ Peter commiserated, not quite unaware of having had a twinge of the same

malady himself. Having overcome, it, however, and proved his own powers aloft, thus wiping off the stain of his seasickness, he was feeling quite pleased with life and was willing to sympathize with the less fortunate.

‘Perhaps if you were to practise a bit, and not look down you might be O.K. You’ll miss such a lot if you never go aloft.’

‘Why? It’s just as good on deck, isn’t it? You see as much.’

Peter hesitated, loath to declare his ideals, however praiseworthy, before a philistine.

‘Yes, but all the fun,’ he said at length, ‘of becoming a seaman, and so on.’

A heavy roll filled the scuppers with a sudden surge of water and made the boys anchor themselves more firmly to the fife-rail.

‘The fun that I’m looking forward to is seeing the dredges come on board. Not messing about with ropes and sails.’

This was too much even for Peter’s good nature. ‘Look here,’ he began, ‘I’m going to be a zoologist myself some day, I expect, but I’d rather make a topsail fast in a gale of wind than dredge up Davy Jones himself. So there!’

He flung away forward and came to rest precariously at the galley door. The cook was stirring

a huge pot which seemed ready to shoot off the stove at any minute.

‘Fat pork again to-day?’ said Peter. ‘Or only seal-blubber?’

The cook grinned. ‘Surprisin’ how soon you come round. Now the mention of fat the other day was enough for you.’

Peter nodded and fell into conversation with the man. The seal-blubber yarn had some truth in it, he found. The cook had spent a hungry winter in a sealer north of the Behring Straits and was not slow to talk about it. The morning slipped away in a twinkling, until towards noon the mate appeared with a sextant in his hand. Much to Peter’s disgust, Marchmont was told off to read the chronometer. The sun, however, was tardy in coming out, and Peter and Tony were seated at table before Marchmont was relieved.

‘Serves him right,’ whispered Peter to his friend. ‘He prefers zoology to seamanship.’

It was their first experience of a meal on the brigantine in a seaway, and little of the liquid portion of the food found its way to their mouths. Peter distinguished himself by overbalancing and launching a mugful of boiling soup over the mate’s knees, and the latter, who up to then had preserved silence, let forth a yell which brought the

watch on deck running to the skylight in alarm. As he eyed the mate pulling the wet serge from his limbs with fingers which trembled with pain and rage, Tony was hard pressed to contain his mirth, but before long he too was in trouble. Incautiously he placed the butter-dish on the bare surface of the table instead of in one of the little compartments partitioned off for the purpose. Came a heavy lurch which made those who were not well jammed-in hang on to the nearest support. Away went the butter-dish down the steep slope. The dish came up all-standing at the fiddles, but it parted company with the butter, which continued its flight straight into the lap of the luckless mate. Tony went hot and prickly all over.

‘Awfully sorry——’ he began.

Then Captain Frazer burst into a laugh.

‘Balm for your wounds, Deacon. You have a most considerate watch.’

The mate stood up and brushed the offending pats from his clothes, then staggered to the companionway and climbed the ladder, muttering darkly as he went.

Ten minutes later Peter and Tony, in a somewhat chastened frame of mind, shouldered themselves along the alleyway and reached their cabin. It was a scene of chaos. The belongings which they

had hastily unpacked the previous night and forgotten to stow were on the floor, and their sea-chests careered in harmony to and fro at every roll, Peter's open and disgorging a few more articles with each movement. As they went down on their hands and knees to wrestle with their personal effects, Tony sighed deeply.

'We've got a lot to learn about this game.'

At four o'clock they were again on deck, but this was the first dog-watch and nothing was expected of them except a spell on the look-out. The wind was freshening and promised to blow harder still, and the clouds drifted low over the turbulent seas. Another two hours below, with another precarious but highly satisfying meal, brought round darkness and eight bells once more, and the beginning of the first watch from eight o'clock to midnight.

Before the relieved men went off duty the big foresail was hauled up under the yard and made fast. It was a black night and the boys, into whose hands buntlines and clew-garnets had been thrust, could only guess at the effect of their labours. But by and by indistinct figures reappeared on the shrouds, and the mate's, 'That'll do the watch,' told them that the job was done. A thick drizzle had begun to fall and the boys in their oilskins

moved stiffly on the sopping, swaying deck. When Peter went to the look-out Tony accompanied him, and together they hung on to the windlass and peered out over the dark sea. Only once did they see a dim light away to the eastward, which the mate, with night-glasses, identified as a fishing-boat lying to her nets.

'A pretty beastly night for fishing,' said Marchmont.

The mate shrugged his shoulders.

'It's a soft night. The herring should be up.'

Slowly the hours passed and midnight came at last. Dark forms began to appear at the fo'c'sle hatch, sleepy-eyed and yawning. Dicky emerged from aft, stretching himself heavily, closely followed by Frazer, who joined the mate at the log on the transom.

'Thirty-two miles. That's good sailing. Wind the same?'

'Inclined to veer a bit, but nothing much in it.'

As Peter clambered into his bunk, he felt the dead weight of his weariness.

'I feel as though I could sleep for a week, and we've only got four hours off.'

But the four hours was not undiluted bliss, for the heavy motion of the ship, together with the boys' inexperience in combating it, made rest

difficult and broken, and when Dicky came to call them it was two much befuddled and underslept youths who answered him.

‘It’s raining still,’ said Dicky encouragingly, ‘but we’ve got the foresail on her again.’

His dripping oilskin was making a pool of water on the cabin floor. ‘I’d better be going. It’s ten minutes to four.’

The boys dressed in silence. There was no sign of dawn when they stepped rather gingerly on to the rain-swept, heaving deck, and felt the glow which they had carried with them from the blankets dissipating in the damp wind. The objects which yesterday had been of the liveliest interest now looked sodden and ghastly; forward the sidelights shed an unearthly glare on the driving raindrops; the seas, friendly before if a trifle boisterous, now had a grim lurking stealth, which caused them every now and then to leap up suddenly in a breaking roar and hang threatening above the rail. Marchmont joined the group of two, his teeth chattering.

‘Why can’t the men get up and do the work? There doesn’t seem to be anything to do anyhow.’

Peter was in momentary agreement with him, but Tony showed his stronger will.

‘We’re supposed to be the men in this watch.’

He drew Peter aside. 'Can't blame the kid really. He didn't ask to come on this show. Different from us.'

Presently the day broke, and with the darkness went the illusory warmth which it had held like a cloak about them. At five-thirty smoke began to pour from the galley stove, and promptly at four bells the cook brought round mugs of coffee. The rain stopped and things began to take on a more cheerful aspect.

The coffee ushered in the morning's work. Tony was told off to draw water, and Peter and Marchmont, armed with brushes and sand, scrubbed down the decks from stem to stern. Somewhat ashamed of his earlier outburst, Marchmont worked with a will, and Peter, not to be outdone, put his best foot foremost; they revelled in the clear green water which Tony swished across the planks and which flashed and sparkled in the morning air. At seven-thirty, when Captain Frazer came from his cabin, the ship shone in the early sunshine like a new pin.

'It seems a different world from what we turned out to,' said Tony, when they had done. 'And the idea of breakfast beats anything. We've been sailors twenty-four hours now, Peter, old son. And had about an hour's sleep. Good work.'

And so it was for four days, except that the boys learned to sleep at every opportunity, before supper and after breakfast, and found that turning out at midnight was worse than turning out at four in the morning. On the fourth day it was Peter who first sighted the Fair Isle, and bellowed out at the top of his voice, 'Land ho! Land on the port bow!'

Soon they were abreast of Sumburgh Head in the Shetlands, and late in the evening, on the last of the waning breeze, the ship passed through the entrance and brought up in Lerwick harbour.

CHAPTER V

THE STORM

IN the morning some business took Captain Frazer ashore, and the boys accompanying him had a chance of seeing the quaint old town whose narrow, winding streets were peopled with fisherfolk of half a dozen nationalities. The stay on land, however, was of short duration, and midday saw them threading their way back through the throng of fishing-boats at anchor in the harbour, to where the brigantine lay at an outside berth. As they passed in front of the town Captain Frazer pointed out the south storm cone flying at the pierhead.

‘The glass is backing very fast. We’re going to get some wind shortly.’

On the brigantine again, the captain held a consultation with Mr. Deacon, who had also noted signs of an approaching change. The mate was in favour of proceeding to sea at once, and getting a lift northward from the gale, if gale should blow. Captain Frazer was not difficult to persuade; both men had unlimited faith in the powers of the *Widgeon*, given plenty of sea room, and both were anxious to try out the new gear before leaving

finally for the long spell at sea to follow the visit to Norway.

In the late afternoon, then, the boys were lending their weight on the windlass to the tune of Wilson's chanties. They had already learned the value of a leader to sing out during heavy operations, and had found that pulling to a chorus reduced the effort by half. Chips exhorted them in a queer falsetto; when not singing, Wilson had an endless string of ejaculations. On a rope he always began with a long drawn 'Ho! come' and then, 'Come rise 'er, come bust 'er, Ho! come stretch her.' Now with canvas to set, they fairly made the harbour resound; blocks clacked, yards were hoisted, sails broke out and were sheeted home; and as the ship moved towards the entrance, the anchor came to the surface and hung half-submerged at the forefoot. Agile as a cat, Kenaud swung over the rail, slid down the chain and perched on the stock. Slipping a strop through the ring, he hooked on the fish-tackle, and was back on deck in a trice. A minute later the anchor was dripping mud from the cathead; then a fluke was fished up, and the half-ton mass of iron tumbled in over the rail.

Outside, the breeze blew fresh from the south, and when they had rounded Bressay and squared

away before it, the good cheer of a fair wind radiated from all hands. The captain, pacing the deck, stopped by the boys.

'With luck, the next land you see will be inside the Arctic Circle.'

'How long will it take us, sir?' asked Tony.

'Four days, or a week perhaps. There's the mate. He wants a word with you.'

Mr. Deacon had a piece of paper in his hand which fluttered awkwardly in the wind.

'We're going on three watches now. Fielding and Hunter the four to eight with me, Marchmont in the captain's watch, eight to twelve.'

'By Jove, that's something like,' said Peter when they were alone. 'Eight hours' sleep every night.'

Tony nodded appreciatively. 'Still, we were getting pretty well broken in to watch and watch. I think we could have stuck it out all right. But it means harder work now while we're at it; fewer hands and longer wheels.'

'And a little more responsibility,' added Peter. 'It's time we did something for our keep.'

But that night, at any rate, Peter was not destined to enjoy his eight hours' sleep. Soon after midnight he was awakened by something peculiar in the motion of the ship. Jammed against the back of his bunk by a huge kitbag put there for the pur-

pose, he was impervious to the sharpest rolling, and as he became conscious he knew instinctively that it was more than an ordinary roll which had disturbed him. For a long time he lay between sleeping and waking, expecting a recurrence at any moment. The sound of the water rushing past the port above his head seemed to have a different note, and the timbers of the ship were creaking and groaning continuously. Little by little sleep was overtaking him once more, when suddenly he found himself wide awake and holding his breath. The ship, steady for a minute, had begun to fall, fall, and still fall. His heart stood still. It was as though she had been launched over the brow of a steep, bottomless pit. She stopped at last, quivered violently, began to rise, and all at once there was a great roar and welter of water on deck. The vessel momentarily seemed to lose all her buoyancy. An eternity passed, then the deck-house door banged open, and the mate's voice came loud and hoarse :

‘All hands! All hands on deck!’

Tony and Peter were out together, groping for their clothes. They fell twice as they struggled up the reeling ladder, but reached the door at last. For a time their senses swam in the uproar of the night, as the wind belaboured them with terrific

impacts. Then the mate spied them, and his voice, reaching them in queer faint gusts, bade them hang on by the mainmast. They found Marchmont there, whitefaced in the gloom, gazing upwards.

'They're aloft, up there,' he shrieked in Tony's ear, and Tony, following his stare, could see figures clinging to the upper topsail yard. Astern, huge seas piled themselves up against the dim skyline, seeming to hang right over the ship, then passed frothing along the quarters, leaping over the bulwarks in the waist. Tony became aware of men labouring close beside him and recognized Frazer. He made his way to him and volunteered assistance, but the work there was finished. Joining the boys by the mainmast, Frazer bent his head to their ears and explained disjointedly.

'We were pooped—sea broke over the stern. Going to heave to, soon. You'll be wanted to help set the reefed mainsail afterwards on braces. Waiting for men aloft now.'

They gazed up at the struggling shapes on the wildly swaying yard. Now the sail, now the men seemed to gain control, then once again the sail would break away with a thunderous flapping and all would be lost in a flurry of spindrift. Higher still Tony could make out a few shreds that had

once been the topgallantsail, and wondered dimly what desperate struggle had ended thus.

The mate came towards them and gave them instructions which were only half intelligible. When he had gone Tony saw that the upper topsail was fast; beneath it, the lower topsail was still set and intact. Dropping one by one off the fore-rigging, Dicky and the bo'sun, Kenaud and Wilson ran along the deck in quick rushes at favourable moments, until they were all gathered in a bunch beside the boys. Pressed against Dicky, Peter could feel the huge chest surging for breath and realized something of his exertions aloft. Then a sea came leaping over the rail and swirled about their knees.

Aft, by the shattered remains of the wheelhouse, Captain Frazer was watching his opportunity, looking now astern in the teeth of the rushing wind, now aloft at the gear. Five minutes passed. The huge grey seas raced and roared, curled and broke, without intermission, every one seeming higher than the last. Then the faintest suggestion of a lull coincided with a break in the succession of waves. Captain Frazer raised an arm.

'Set the mainsail!'

The figures huddled by the fife-rail leapt into activity; the boom lifted and flew out to port,

canvas slatted for a minute, came taut and slatted again. Somewhere aloft the peak halyards had fouled and were immovable. Frazer sprang into the rigging and disappeared in the gloom. Then his voice came from above:

‘Take it out aft. Away aft with it.’

In a body and aided by a lurch of the ship, they swung out on the rope. It came free at last with a jerk. The ship’s head rounding to starboard brought the wind and sea abeam, and again above the tumult came the roar of the captain:

‘Lee fore brace!’

Peter dashed to the rail and, in the confused mass of swaying men, found a rope. Over and over the ship canted. Peter, at last unable to keep a foothold, swung helplessly, and looking up, saw the weather bulwarks high above him and Frazer and another figure slacking off the braces. Then the sea poured in over his head, and he went down in a welter of seaboots and ropes. For an endless space he was washed about, trampled on, bruised and battered, completely submerged. His lungs were bursting. Suddenly, quite close to him, he heard the mate’s voice:

‘Belay braces. Staysail sheet!’

Still in the scuppers, but free now of water, he could see men tumbling forward, and with a kind



HIGH ABOVE THE WEATHER SIDE A CREST REARED ITSELF UP, LEAPT ACROSS THE BOWS, BURIED THE HATCH COAMINGS, AND CAME SWEEPING AT THEM.

of desperate resignation went after them. Ahead of him something was cracking like a machine-gun. He recognized the broad back of Wilson straining on a rope, and snatching up the loose part, threw his weight on it. The awful detonations ceased, and Wilson, turning on him, was bellowing, 'Come up, behind.'

He let go the rope and stood undecided. Then in a dreamlike way he heard some one shout, 'Hold on all,' but paid no heed. A second later Wilson had thrust him down into the scuppers behind a stanchion, and dropping himself, had flung an arm round his waist. High above the weather side a crest reared itself up, leapt across the bows, buried the hatch coamings, and came sweeping at them. Peter filled his lungs and shut his eyes. Like a solid wall the water descended, swirling in an irresistible stream, nearly tearing his clothes from his body. Again his senses almost deserted him, but he held on, and at last felt the air come again. Wilson was tugging him to his feet. In a momentary quiet he heard the seaman's voice, surprisingly, 'It's a dry shirt you'll be wantin' this night,' and then the rush of wind made speech impossible again.

The ship was now head reaching and meeting the seas on the starboard bow; with every heavy roll

the lee rail disappeared from sight in a smother of foam. Struggling aft, Peter found Tony and Marchmont hanging on by the weather rigging, staring fascinated at the piling-up seas which must, it seemed, inevitably swamp the ship. But each time, just an instant before the wave broke, she rose miraculously and the water passed under the hull. The mate, moving warily round the decks, came to rest beside them, passed a hand along the pin-rail, and burst into an angry shout. One of the braces had been belayed on a wooden pin. As he stood waiting for the bo'sun to fetch a tackle, the miracle failed to happen. Caught in a double trough, the brigantine, instead of rolling to leeward and rising clear, rolled to windward into the approaching sea. A belated struggle upwards, and then the breaking water hurled itself across the bulwarks and flooded the decks waist-deep. For ten seconds she wallowed uncertainly, waterlogged and lifeless, but at last cleared herself.

The mate, coughing up sea water, took the roll. The afterpart of the ship had fared worst and most of the hands had been forward. No one was damaged. Leaving Frazer to shift the brace to an iron pin, the mate called the bo'sun and disappeared within the deckhouse. Ten minutes later the two struggled out again bearing a couple

of canvas bags of oil, which they carried away forward into the gloom. Expecting he knew not what, Tony watched the sea to windward. He had heard of oil on troubled waters, but had always looked on it as outworn magic. Now, before his gaze, something was going on, something inexplicable and indefinable. He could see the oiliness spreading on the surface, but felt no change in the ship's motion. And yet there was a difference. A sea heaved itself up alongside and Tony shut his eyes, expecting the wind to cut off the crest and send it flying in his face. But nothing happened. He looked again and understood. Where the oil lay there were no crests, no breaking water. He turned to Peter, caught his arm, and pointed to his discovery.

For a long time they watched the oily patch, which, spreading from the bags hung over the bows, stood like a barrier between them and the fury of the waves. At last Frazer beckoned them into the house. His face was covered with blood from a cut on his forehead.

'It's seven bells. You had better go below and change into dry clothes for your watch.'

'Won't we be wanted?' asked Peter.

'No. She's doing all right now. There's nothing more to be done but wait till it takes off.'

'Is this sort of thing common?'

'Worst I've ever seen.'

The alleyway was flooded, but the coaming, over which Peter had barked his shins so often, had kept their cabin dry. With fingers stiffened by the cold and sodden with sea water, Tony lighted the lamp. In silence they struggled into fresh clothes, both too fearful, as they admitted afterwards, to care for speech. They were berthed on the lee side of the ship, and the hush after the uproar on deck appalled them both. Pausing only long enough to put on oilskins which they had not had time to don earlier, they blew the lamp out and bolted up the companion ladder. The weather appeared to be worse than when they had left the deck, but Dicky, interrogated with difficulty on the subject, said that there had been no change.

Then began a long period of anxious inactivity. Hour after hour wind and sea raged with unchanging fury, and stinging rain added to the discomfort of those on deck. The wheel was lashed, and under the balanced canvas the ship lay-to of her own volition. Dawn broke at last through a leaden sky and over a grim, deep-furrowed ocean. The boys looked at the damage wrought by the night. The wheelhouse was a ruin of jagged splinters; the bulwarks by the fore-

rigging were stove in; the top-gallantsail and inner jib had, to all intents and purposes, disappeared.

At half-past seven the wind slackened definitely, and at the same time began to veer to the west. Coming from the chart-room to his father who, haggard and drawn by the night's vigil, was still aft, Frazer reported that the barometer was rising. Peter caught the word and its import, and had a wild sense of relief. But his joy was shortlived, for his bruised and aching body refused to participate in it. He found himself so stiff that he could scarcely handle the bowl of hot porridge which the cook had miraculously prepared. But the warmth of the food revived him, so that at ten o'clock, when the ship was put about, he was fit for the final struggle with the gale. Then and then only, with the brigantine once more on her course, and the sky breaking up to windward, the boys, after eleven hours on deck, crept below, and too tired to remove their clothes, tumbled into their bunks as they stood.

At midday Frazer awoke them to ask if they wanted to turn out for a meal, but rest was more precious than food, and they were asleep again before the cabin door had closed behind him.

When at last Peter woke up and stretched his aching limbs it was close on half-past three, and

Roberts was standing before him with a mug of tea and some thick slices of buttered toast. He beamed at the cook.

'This is jolly decent of you.'

'Not my doing really. The mate reckoned you'd best have a bite before your watch. It's a change of weather we've been having.'

'The mate! Good heavens! Tony, here's the mate been ordering tea for us.'

'And here's something else. From the Old Man.'

He held out a woollen bundle—helmets, gloves, and mufflers.

'Why, what's it all about? You'd think we were first-class passengers.'

Roberts grinned. 'We've all had our little lot. You'd better try 'em on,' he added from the door.

Reclining luxuriously among the blankets, Peter ate and drank in deep content.

'I never expected to taste food again,' Tony remarked thoughtfully from below.

'Nor I,' responded Peter with his mouth full. 'Particularly on the staysail sheet. If Wilson hadn't pinned me down then, dear knows what would have happened. Where were you?'

'At the wheel. The skipper sang out for an extra hand to help to get her round and, as I was nearest,

I went. I made certain she was going right over on her beam ends. Never felt so bad in my life. Mills was groaning and grunting away to himself, too. He got badly knocked about when the wheelhouse went, but he wouldn't be relieved.'

He was silent for a time.

'I knew a storm at sea was bad, but I didn't understand. Nobody could, I suppose, until he'd seen one.'

When at eight bells they went on deck, they realized the meaning of Captain Frazer's solicitude. The air temperature had dropped well below freezing-point, and icy squalls were bearing down from the north-west with intermittent hail showers. They learned from Frazer that Mills's collar-bone was fractured, but beyond some minor cuts and bruises no one else was hurt. Already a new top-gallantsail had been bent, and the wreck of the wheelhouse removed; Chips, with his mouth full of nails, was repairing the planking of the bulwarks.

At dusk the hail changed to snow, and by the end of the watch the ship had a ghostly white mantle which glittered coldly in the starlight between the squalls. On the look-out forward, the boys were glad enough of the extra protection of a woollen helmet, and at eight bells found added

comfort in the glowing stove in the saloon, where they could thaw out their hands.

The weather continued cold for some days, and the boys had their first sight of Norway and the Lofoten Islands under snow. As the ship passed up West Fiord Captain Frazer pointed out the position of the Maelstrom, but refused to act on Dicky's half-serious suggestion that they should have a closer look at it. Soon the fiord narrowed down until they were sailing along a channel not much wider than a river; on either side and on the islands little toylike wooden houses stood among the birch trees, or collected into tiny villages; high prowd boats in gay colours passed to and fro.

At dusk the ship came up in a little haven on the east or mainland side, but with the first sight of dawn continued her winding way, and late in the following evening dropped anchor off Tromso.

CHAPTER VI

ADRIFT

ON the afternoon before departing from the Norwegian town, Captain Frazer announced his intention of putting into an unfrequented bay some thirty miles to the north, where a remarkable geological formation was known to occur. It happened then that, after an easy day's coasting, the brigantine brought up near the mouth of a stream, which tumbled headlong from the snow-clad mountains beyond. The coast was rugged and wild in the extreme, and offered some difficulties to a landing party; excepting only the little beach in the estuary, there was no break in the line of cliffs, which fell precipitously towards the sea as as far as the eye could reach.

At supper John made a suggestion to Captain Frazer which the latter was not unwilling to consider. During the week in Tromso the boys had had their fill of the shore, while the men had been working on the damages to the hull and rigging wrought by the gale. John requested that the boys should be left to look after the ship for the day, and that Captain Frazer should give the hands a chance to stretch their legs on land. The follow-

ing morning, after a careful consideration of the weather, it was decided to put the plan into action, and shortly after eight o'clock the starboard boat was lowered away and pulled towards the coast. Just before it was out of earshot, Captain Frazer stood up in the stern and shouted to John that should a strong breeze spring up the party would abandon the expedition at once and return to the brigantine. Then the men gave way together and the boat began to diminish in the distance. For a long time John kept it in sight and could distinguish his father's upright figure in the stern, and the glint of the sun on the yellow beard of the Norwegian who had been engaged to replace Mills.

Alone on the ship in the bright morning air the boys were in high spirits.

'Wouldn't it be great to get the anchor up and stand out to sea—just the five of us?' said Peter, running his thumb along the edge of a sheath knife which he had purchased in Tromsø, and which he carried, seamanlike, in his belt. 'I bet we could make a good show.'

Tony replied by challenging him in a race to the mast-head, and in an instant they were off, one on each side. They reached the foretop almost level, but in the topmast rigging Tony's agility put him ahead and he finished a good six feet in

front of his rival. Seated astride the top-gallant yard, Peter could see the boat nosing its way about the river mouth, searching for a landing place. Tony, however, had his eyes turned in the other direction, and was scanning the northern horizon. He had heard in Tromso that the pack-ice was still fairly close to North Cape, and he had a secret hope that by some miracle he might sight a stray floe.

‘I wonder what an ice-blink is like,’ he remarked.

‘Dunno, I’m sure.’

‘The sealers can tell when there’s ice about by the appearance of the sky.’

‘I expect it’s white like the sky over these mountains,’ opined Peter, blowing his hands lustily to stop them tingling.

‘Yes, I hadn’t thought of that,’ Tony admitted. The sea was empty to the north and he was now gazing towards the inhospitable coast. A hail greeted them from below. It was John asking for a volunteer cook. They descended at once and found a controversy raging over the piece of fresh meat for dinner; John thought it should be fried, Dicky and Marchmont were firm for stewing. Peter examined the rather nondescript lump of flesh and pronounced in favour of roasting.

‘All right. You roast it,’ said John.

As the morning went on, cooking became the prime interest of all hands, and Peter's actions were followed and criticized with unflagging zeal. Prompt at noon the food was carried below, Tony being left on deck to keep watch whilst the others ate. The roasted meat proved to be edible, if not exactly done to a turn, and soon the meal was in full swing.

'Very queer being alone on the ship like this,' said Dicky, gazing at the empty stove.

'How queer?' asked John.

'I don't know. Kind of eerie.'

'Rats! It's the fire you're missing. We must light it up soon. It's rather chilly down here.'

Marchmont rose and went to relieve Tony. The latter remarked as he took his place at the table, 'There's a bit of a breeze springing up. Offshore.'

When they had finished John went leisurely on deck and looked round. Puffs of wind were spreading out from the land, sending the water slap-slap against the ship's sides. The sun had lost its early brilliance, but still shone. In the chart-room John tapped the barometer and frowned. 'Anyhow', he remarked to himself, 'they can't have gone far, and they won't go on if it does blow up.'

He came out into the wan sunshine, and set his

crew to clear up the decks and make everything ready for sailing. Then he went aloft with a pair of binoculars and searched the estuary and land beyond, but saw no sign of the party. The wind was now fairly steady, and here and there little flecks of white broke the dark hue of the sea. On deck again he said to Dicky,

‘The pater won’t want to stay here any longer than he can help. The bottom is too soft for good holding.’

As the afternoon advanced the sky became more and more overcast, and the cold made work on deck a trial. But John kept all hands busy and worked himself with a will, until something soft and cold struck his cheek. It was a snowflake. Ten minutes later the outline of the coast was blurred by the driving white particles. Below for a minute to put on a heavy jacket, John felt the ship heel over to a gust. He went aloft once more and scanned the coast. There was nothing to be seen, and he was on the point of putting away the glasses when he noticed something dark on the water. He focused on it and gazed for a long time, wiped the snow from the lenses, and gazed again.

He descended slowly and thoughtfully. Five minutes afterwards he drew Dicky aside.

‘The boat is drifting off the shore towards us.

Not a soul on board, but there's no mistaking her. She must have come adrift somehow.'

'What's to be done?' asked Dicky. 'Shall we go off in the other boat and pick them up?'

John shook his head. 'It would take four of us to pull a boat in this breeze and we can't leave the ship to one man. We've simply got to hang on here till the wind takes off.'

They were silent for a time.

'It explains why the pater didn't come off earlier. They must have returned to the beach hours ago and found the boat gone.'

Dicky nodded. 'They are going to have a cold night of it anyhow,' he remarked.

'I think they'll be all right so far as that goes. They're none of them greenhorns. But,' John paused and scanned the unbroken pall of snow-clouds, 'I hope it doesn't blow any harder.'

The others had caught a hint of something amiss from the demeanour of the two older boys, and were standing gazing at the all but invisible shore. John went aft and told them what he had seen, then ordered the port anchor, which was hanging in the water, to be let go. Dicky threw off the turns of the cable, eased it over the barrel of the windlass, and away it went. For an appreciable fraction of a minute the ship shook to the rattle

of the running chain. It stopped at last and Dicky paid out slack.

‘Seems pretty deep here,’ he said.

John did not reply. He was watching the cable where it entered the water. Almost imperceptibly it left the vertical and streamed out ahead. Of the younger boys Tony was the first to grasp the import of its movement.

‘By Jove! She’s taking up the slack. The other anchor’s dragging.’

‘Take a cast of the lead,’ John ordered. Dicky obeyed. Ten, twelve, fifteen, seventeen, ‘Twenty fathoms,’ he announced. The previous night, as they all knew, they had let go in ten. The lead-line began to slant ahead as the cable had done. Half-fascinated, the boys hung over the bulwarks staring at it. John took another cast and got twenty-two fathoms. Again the angle showed the ship’s motion, this time more rapid. The wind aloft had risen to a howl and the boys could feel the hull quivering. The drifting boat was visible in the gathering dusk a few hundred yards away, her thwarts showing white with snow as she tumbled awkwardly about.

‘We can’t do anything for her, can we?’ asked Peter.

‘Unless a miracle happens,’ said John, ‘we’ve

got to get sail on the ship and beat her to and fro all night.'

The boys were silent, their attention fixed about the swirling forefoot. Sometimes, as the anchors found temporary holding, the cables would strain and rise dripping from the water, and the eddies and whirlpools under the bows would disappear. But these pauses were shortlived. As the ship drifted farther from the land, the sea became more choppy, and soon the hawse-pipes were flooding the deck at every head-lurch, washing back the snow which gathered already in sheltered spaces. John drew Dicky into the chart-room and shut the door.

'Any minute now we'll lose our grip of the bottom. When that happens her head will most likely swing off the wind and we'll never be able to get the anchors out of the water. We must set the reefed mainsail at all costs and keep her head to wind. I want you to look after that. When it's done we'll heave up.'

He paused and lighted the lamp, then pointed to the chart.

'The wind is south-west. We've got to stand off the land on the port tack. It may be a job finding our way back.'

'What will happen to the shore party?'

John shook his head. 'They are within easy reach of a Lapp settlement, if we don't pick them up before their food goes.'

Dicky moved away. As he opened the door a flurry of snow whirled in and fell on the books and instruments; the lamp flickered and went out. For a moment John felt a blind horror of the coming night as the flakes stung his face and drove into his eyes; the band of boys by the rail seemed a ridiculous handful with which to ride out a gale at sea, the blizzard an enemy too terrible for youthful endurance. He pulled himself together.

'Aft with Dicky all of you, and reef the mainsail.'

John remained in the bows watching the set of the cables, and calculating how best to economize the strength of his slender crew. To heave up both anchors was out of the question; long before it could be accomplished the ship would require attention, and the remnant of hands left for the windlass would be unable to man it to any purpose. He decided at length to knock out a shackle-pin on the light cable and let it go. A figure appeared at his side, battling against the wind.

'Mainsail's ready for setting now.'

'Very good. Fetch all hands for'ard here and we'll start to heave up.'

Without delay John unshackled the port cable,

cast off the end, and held his breath as it flew away, the last links dealing the hawse-pipe a slashing blow which shook the ship from stem to stern. The boys had gathered beside him and together they got to work on the heavy chain. For twenty minutes they toiled up and down, up and down, and foot by foot the cable came inboard. Suddenly the ship began to swing and the cable jammed under the forefoot. John had been waiting for this, and sent Dicky aft with the others to set the mainsail. The snow was driving so hard that in the dusk the stern of the ship was barely visible from the bows, but between the gusts of wind John could hear Dicky's shouts as he laboured on the throat halyards. The ship was lying broadside to the wind, heavily listed by the pressure on her top-hamper. John waited anxiously for her head to come up. Without warning, the shouts from aft ceased; there came a shriek of snow-laden wind and a dull, splintering crash. John leapt aft. The mainsail was bellying out to port in a nondescript mass, the gaff broken through the middle and hanging downwards. The boys, halyards in hand, stood helpless.

'Lower away and save the canvas!' John shouted. The formless sail was drawn down and secured roughly, and once more all hands went to the wind-

lass. As the chain came home every link grated round the keel and John felt little hope of seeing the anchor secured. But by a lucky stroke the ship swung round in a semicircle; the chain came clear, and redoubling their efforts, the boys got the anchor on board. Frazer was thinking hard. To beat the ship without the mainsail was, he knew, an impossibility. He considered setting a rag of some kind in its place, decided against the attempt, and came to his conclusion. There was nothing for it but to run under bare poles. He instructed Dicky and Marchmont to stream the log, sent Tony and Peter to the wheel, and began the long vigil. The ship gathered way, grew easier in her motion, and settled on a steady course. Before long, John calculated, they would be beyond the shelter of the land, and encountering the full force of the Atlantic.

An hour passed. Tony and Peter, braced one on either side of the rebuilt wheelhouse, were steering grimly. The wind sang around the wooden structure, carrying fine snow through every chink and cranny, so that here and there it drifted in tiny drifts; big seas leapt up and fell in over the rail; the wheel kicked and struggled as the waves broke round the rudder. John came to the side window, slid it back, and shouted:

'How is she going?'

'North-east,' replied Tony.

'All right. Keep her at that. It's ten o'clock now. Dicky will relieve you at midnight.'

The window slid to and he was gone. Night had brought complete darkness, and the boys could see nothing ahead beyond the binnacle and the compass card, which swung to and fro despite their utmost efforts. A curious sense of detachment came upon them. They seemed to be shut up in a tiny tossing box, existing in space, severed from everything. The faint glow from the binnacle lit up their faces and the white walls about them, but the windows were dark as black velvet. Only the little drifts of snow eddied softly about their feet. After an endless lapse of time, Peter spoke:

'Do you think anything has happened, that we're alone on the ship?'

Tony, wrenching the spokes upward, did not reply.

'It's hours and hours since Frazer was here, I'm certain.'

Gazing steadfastly at the swaying compass, Tony felt hypnotized. Time and again he had to force himself back to reality and the belief in the effectiveness of his movements. Suddenly the door flew open and Dicky appeared.

'Anything wrong?' asked Peter.

'Sea is running higher, that's all. What's the course?'

Peter and Tony stumbled out on deck, and made their way forward in the inky night. In places the snow was a foot deep, but mostly the deck was washed or swept bare. They perceived a radiance in the galley, and found Marchmont there, stoking up a huge fire and tending a steaming pot, his face begrimed with smoke. Beyond on the foredeck John was pacing to and fro, unsteady on the lurching planks. Tony reported to him.

'All right. Get some food from Marchmont, and keep handy for a call.'

They jostled into the galley and leant against the bulkhead. Marchmont ladled out cups of soup and passed them a loaf. They ate and drank ravenously, revelling in the warmth from the glowing coals. Marchmont, bracing himself before the stove and keeping the fire up with meticulous care, had acquired a new dignity. When they had finished, he produced platefuls of corned beef and potatoes.

'Have the others eaten?' Tony asked.

'Frazer hasn't yet. He won't leave the deck.'

A sea broke over the rail and swirled about the galley door.

'I've had one in here already,' said Marchmont, 'almost up to my knees.'

Tony nodded. 'Good work. Give me a cup of soup and I'll take it out to Frazer.'

He opened the door, and the red light from the stove reflected on the wildly whirling snow. Presently he returned and addressed Peter.

'We are to put extra lashings on the boat, in case we ship a heavy one.'

The boys went out into the blinding rush of the elements and began the work, fumbling with half-frozen hands over the ice-stiffened ropes. The snow stung their eyes and ears, and sifted through their clothing; in the blackness they lost touch with one another when a few feet distant. It was almost an hour before they staggered back exhausted into the warmth. Peter looked at his watch.

'Daylight soon now.'

The heat after the extreme cold made him drowsy, and gradually he slipped down on to the deck before the fire. For a time he gazed without movement at the red-hot bars and the glowing heart of the coals, then, huddled up with one knee among the ashes, he fell asleep. When he awoke Tony was plucking him by the shoulder and the snugness of the night had given way before the

grey bitter light of morning. He rose up stiff and aching.

Relieving tackles had been rigged to the steering-gear so that the wheel required less effort, and Peter was left alone to keep the vessel steady. It was six o'clock; the snow had ceased, but the wind was as strong as ever and piercingly cold.

All day the brigantine drove before the wind, the boys snatching sleep and food whenever possible, too worn out by the buffetings of the storm to discuss the situation at any length. At midday John made an attempt to heave-to; the mainstay-sail, stiff as iron with frost, was unbent and hoisted on the throat halyards; the sheet hauled aft, and the helm put down. The ship rounded to slowly, but her bows refused to meet the seas, and she lay in the trough, shipping so much water that John was glad to set a headsail and get her back to the comparative safety of her former course.

Towards nightfall on the second day Tony was on the look-out on the foredeck. The visibility was going fast, and he could see little beyond the bowsprit, which hung with fantastic masses of ice; the wind still howled in the rigging, but his ears were accustomed to the sound and discounted it. It was a hint of something different which caused him to cup his hands on the sides of his head and

turn to starboard. For a long time the wind baffled him and he was beginning to think that he had been mistaken, when a lull came. Very low and distant he heard a strange, whispering roar. Again the wind came and obscured all else; the next lull yielded nothing. He waited, tense and strung up. At last he caught the sound again.

Terror came upon him momentarily and he was unable to move. Then he fled to the chart-room and called John.

Together they stood on the swaying deck while the sound grew to starboard, came ahead, extended away to port. They could see nothing. Tony made a remark to Frazer. The latter nodded hastily and sent the younger boy aft to stand by the steersman and transmit orders. In the darkness the whispering was becoming an uproar.

Frazer no longer had any doubts. For the last twenty-four hours there had been a vague fear at the back of his mind that this might happen, that the ship, carried too far to the north, might become involved with the pack-ice. Now that the fear had become a reality he blamed himself bitterly for the dangers which he had brought on the vessel, mainly through his inexperience. An older man, a riper seaman, he thought, could have found some means by which to check the headlong drive north-

wards and to avert the perils which must follow inevitably on contact with the ice. But there was no time now for self-reproaches. He must think and act.

A wave reared itself alongside the ship. The unbroken crest, no longer smooth and reflecting, lifted with it a grey granular mass of slush. At the same moment there was a rustling noise from under the bows, followed by a series of soft thuds. Peter stumbled forward to the rail, and John heard him give a gasp as he saw the ice-covered sea. The vessel lost way, then broke through this first barrier and gathered speed. Again she slackened her pace, and a tumbling floe three feet thick spun round and released her. John leapt aloft and peered ahead. Again and again the ship was checked, again and again the sea threatened to throw on to her decks huge masses of loose ice. From his perch John began to distinguish heavier floes whose solidity was undamaged by the sea, and to collide with which was to court disaster. The ship so far had only met with fragments and brash; he set to work to con her between the rigid floes. Slowly the pack became closer, the channels of open water narrower. The sea was subsiding, and here and there heavier ice was white-coated with snow. Instinctively John avoided the white floes, seeking

desperately the clear leads and grey water-washed fragments. Under bare poles the ship would hardly steer, and he dared not risk her being carried broadside against the ice. At all costs he must take the blows bow on.

Suddenly, without warning, the ice disappeared and the brigantine was running in a smooth clear lake. John held his breath while the ship, unimpeded, gathered way and raced along. For a moment he thought that the danger was past, but reason told him otherwise. He strained his eyes to catch the first sign of the next barrier. A hundred yards away it showed up, white and unbroken. He scanned the water for anything on which to break the speed of the ship, some loose floe, or soft ice. There was nothing. She seemed to be rushing at a solid wall. He gripped the yard and waited, endlessly it seemed, then shouted an order to the helmsman. The ship met the ice squarely with an impact which carried those on deck off their feet. The bow rose up on the ice, stopped, slipped back, and at the same moment a heavy spar crashed to the deck.

CHAPTER VII

PACK-ICE

DICKY had been winded by colliding with the wheel when the ship stopped; Peter's elbow was grazed by a hurtling block, but apart from this the younger boys escaped with heavy falls. The ship swung round till her port side lay against the floe, then came to rest; the wind, whose venom seemed to have spent itself in the last mad rush, pressed the hull against the ice, but threatened no harm. Dicky remained in the wheelhouse, gasping hard, but ready for orders. He saw Marchmont move to the bulwarks, look over and throw up his hands.

'There's something on the ice—alive,' he yelled. Dicky sprang to the side and stared. A black object was struggling convulsively, half in the water, half out of it, now gaining in an effort to raise itself on to the floe, now sliding back into the icy sea. Dicky stood at the rail, horrified and fascinated, till suddenly the truth dawned on him.

'Get a rope quick. It's Frazer!'

Careless of the consequences, he threw himself down on to the ice, slipped, recovered, and ran towards his shipmate. The floe, undermined by

the sea, was treacherous at the edge, and Dicky found that he could not get close to Frazer without heavy risk of joining him in the water. He unwound a long woollen scarf from his neck, and flung out the end. John grasped it, and a minute later lay breathless and exhausted on the floe.

‘Can you walk?’ Dicky asked.

‘I’m afraid not. Legs are numbed.’

He tried to rise and fell back. Dicky, on his knees, began to chafe and slap the other’s limbs. He slowly became conscious of a voice and listened. It was Tony repeating something desperately. The word ‘crack’ came to him but nothing more. He sprang to his feet and looked towards the ship. A dark fissure was opening in the white, growing even as he looked. He caught John round the shoulders and pulled him upright, but he collapsed again at once. Dicky drew a deep breath, stooped down, and lifted the other bodily. With short steps he staggered over the uneven surface, gauging the width of the crack as he went. He decided that it was seven feet, and gathered himself for the spring. From the other side Tony watched him in amazement, saw him take off with Frazer in his arms, saw him give a wriggle in mid-air and land with his right foot on the solid ice, saw the pair of them go down in a heap in front of him.

He leapt to their assistance, pulled Dicky to his feet, clear of the fissure, and together they carried Frazer to the ship's side. An empty davit was swung outboard, a rope passed round Frazer's waist, and in a few moments he was on the deck.

A little later he lay in the chart-room, wrapped in a dozen blankets and sipping a hot drink which Marchmont had produced. By and by the others reappeared.

'What damage?'

'All O.K. She's making no water for'ard,' Dicky reported. 'The maintopmast came down. That was the smash we heard. Nothing else that I can see.'

Frazer relaxed. 'Thank goodness it wasn't the foretopmast. No one hurt?'

'Peter's arm is bruised a bit, but no bones broken.'

'Good. Is the ship lying quiet? Do you think she'll move soon?'

Dicky shook his head. 'We've moved up broad-side to the head of a little bay. She can't shift unless the ice breaks up or the wind changes.' He paused. 'Tell us what happened.'

Frazer grinned. 'When the ship struck I was well out on the foreyard and simply somersaulted into the sea,' he explained. 'When I came up I

had my back to the ship and only saw the ice. A bit dazed, I expect. For a while I thought she had sunk and reckoned I'd better get up on the ice. I didn't realize that the ship was afloat till Dicky reached me.'

'It was lucky you fell on the sea and not on the floe,' said Dicky. He stepped out on deck, looked round and returned.

'You'd better turn in and get some sleep. We're stuck here for the night. I'll arrange watches.'

After some demur, Frazer agreed, and went below to his cabin on the strict understanding that he should be called if the ship began to move. The trio of younger boys were standing by the lee bulwarks looking down on the ice, excitement giving way to the dejection of fatigue.

'You've got your ice, all right,' said Peter to Tony. 'And it nearly got Frazer. I wonder what we should have done if we'd lost him?'

No one replied. Presently they tossed for first watch and the lot fell to Tony. He went to his cabin and put on extra gloves and muffler, for the temperature was low, then waved the others off the deck. When he was alone he began to pace up and down, pausing sometimes to listen to the faint rustle of the brash-ice against the hull. He felt rather than saw the ice-field around, and was

thrilled by its mysteriousness. Was this really the polar pack of which he had read so much, or merely an odd collection of floes disconnected from the main body of ice which capped the world? If he got down and jumped from floe to floe how far could he get? He felt that he wanted to sail on and on through the frigid throng until the ship touched at last the fringe of ice that went solid to the pole.

His thoughts were disturbed by Frazer, who had left his bunk to prowls uneasily from bulwark to bulwark. Neither spoke, and by and by Tony was alone again. And so it came about that he was the first to see the wonder of the Arctic pack-ice as the rising sun revealed it, stretching away in hummocks and flats as far as the eye could reach. A mile to the north-east a low, tabular berg thrust itself black and square against the dawn; otherwise there was no break in the endless expanse of floes and waterways. The ice alongside the ship had a depth of ten or twelve feet, and Tony could see in the dark blue water small fishes darting to and fro about the lower edges. Ivory gulls hovered over the snow and perched on the sparkling tips of hummocks, their plumage so white that only in motion could they be distinguished from their surroundings.

At four o'clock Tony's watch was over, but so entranced was he that the time slipped by unnoticed. The wind had fallen to a perfect calm and every rope and spar gleamed under its coating of ice. An inquisitive seal thrust its head out of the water and stared at the ship, dived, then came up twenty yards away to renew its scrutiny from another angle, its appearance so like that of a friendly dog that Tony warmed to it at once, and was sorry when it went away.

Marchmont stepped out of the deckhouse yawning sleepily, but nevertheless having a business-like air.

'Why didn't you call me?' he asked. 'It's seven o'clock.'

'I had no idea it was so late. Isn't it glorious?'

Marchmont disappeared, and Tony could hear him raking out the galley fire. Presently blue spirals of smoke began to rise from the short stove-pipe, and drift upwards in the clear sunlit air. Tony wandered to the galley door in deep meditation. He hesitated, then addressed Marchmont.

'Peter and I thought you were a rum sort of chap. We've changed our minds.'

Marchmont's face, unwashed for two days, broke into a grin.

'That's jolly decent of you—to say it, I mean.'

Tony turned away to pace the deck, until an idea struck him. He returned to the cook.

'Let's have a sit-down meal ready for the others in the saloon. I'll act steward.'

He did so, laying the table carefully and lighting the stove. At eight o'clock when he called all hands, Marchmont had porridge prepared and unlimited quantities of ham keeping hot in the frying-pan. None the worse for his ducking, Frazer was first on deck. He looked round, then went for the sextant and took an observation.

'Have to log you for disobeying orders,' he said to Tony with a grin. 'Has she shifted any?'

Tony shook his head. 'Only a foot or two back and forwards.'

The radiant morning and a good breakfast acted like a charm on the spirits of all hands, and cheerfulness reigned in the saloon.

'All we want now,' said Peter, 'is a gale of wind to put us back on the coast, and we'll have something to talk about for the rest of our lives.'

'But as we haven't got any wind, and small chance of a northerly gale,' Frazer took him up good-naturedly, 'we'd best talk of how we're going to get back to the coast.'

'Do you think there'll be any difficulty?' asked Tony.

‘Not if we can get clear of the pack,’ John replied. ‘But tacking the ship in narrow leads is a pretty hopeless proposition.’

‘Best get the gaff patched first, I suppose,’ Dicky broke in, ‘and then we can sail her properly when we get the chance.’

John nodded. ‘We’ll do that to-day. If I get another shot at the sun at noon we’ll know our whereabouts definitely, and will be able to shape a course accordingly.’ He rose from his seat and threw some coals on the stove. ‘We’ll hold a council of war to-night—war against the Arctic.’

Much against his wishes, Tony was sent below to rest. When in the late afternoon he came on deck he found the repairs on the gaff finished and the tangle of ropes and stays, caused by the fall of the topmast, cleared away. The sun shone out of a cloudless sky, over a windless, ice-covered sea.

The ship lay in her old berth, seeming in the still atmosphere as immobile and rigid as though built on the solid land. Frazer and Dicky were down on the ice looking at the planking, and talking desultorily. Tony joined them and began to examine the surface under his feet. He scraped aside the loose snow, expecting to come on a clear surface such as he had skated on many a time at home; but instead he found that the snow merely

grew harder and harder, merging imperceptibly into the ice.

'Give us a hand here,' John called. He had his back to the hull now and was pushing it away from the ice. Above, Peter was lowering a heavy baulk of timber to act as a fender. Ropes had been run out from bow and stern and made fast to blocks of ice on the floe, so that when the fender was in position the ship moved slowly back again.

'Not much good,' said Frazer, 'but it'll save her a little.'

Two hours later they were all in the saloon. Frazer brought a chart and unrolled it on the table.

'It's like this,' he began slowly. 'Without wind we can't move, and even with wind, getting back through the ice is going to be difficult. As Peter said, what we really want is a north-east breeze, which would scatter the pack and take us back to Norway. On the other hand, with southerly wind we might be able to gain a little, but certainly not much.'

He paused while the boys, elbows on the table, leaned over the chart. He pointed to a pencilled cross.

'That's our position to within a mile or so. The horizon was bad and we can't be quite certain, but it's near enough for practical purposes. In any

case, you will notice that with a prevailing south-west wind, the White Sea is an easier mark than Tromso. Again, the Sailing Directions say that the pack very seldom comes west of a line between Tromso and Bear Island at this time of year, in which case it might be better for us to go west, or even north-west, to free ourselves. Whenever we can, of course, we will sail south-west, but we must decide what the next best direction is, south towards the White Sea, or west towards the open Atlantic. What are your ideas?’

There was silence for a time, then Dicky spoke. ‘What would our position be if we reached Archangel, say?’

‘We could get a message through to the pater at Tromso, and he could come on by steamer with the others.’

‘That might be the best plan perhaps.’

No one else had anything to say and John resumed:

‘The difficulty about the White Sea is that we have no large-scale charts, and no Sailing Directions. We could find our way there with this chart, but we might easily come to grief near the coast, within a few miles of safety.’

‘Do you favour a westerly course then?’ asked Dicky.



NEW FLOES WERE BEGINNING TO APPEAR ONE AFTER ANOTHER,
UNTIL IN THE EARLY MORNING THE SHIP WAS HEMMED IN ON ALL
SIDES.

John shook his head. 'Not exactly. It would be easier, but we would be longer out of touch with the world. I think, charts or no charts, the White Sea has it. Yes?'

The others agreed. 'For the rest, we must work the ship as best we can. There won't be much sleep for any one till we get to port.'

'Is the ship likely to be nipped by the ice?' asked Peter.

'I don't think there's much danger so long as the pack keeps open. It's only when frost knits it together into rigid fields that there's much to fear. At the same time, we'll provision the boat and keep it swung out in case of accidents.'

Next morning there was a light southerly wind which made Frazer smile somewhat grimly.

'Now we have decided to go south,' he remarked to Dicky, 'the wind'll only let us sail west. We might as well harbour our energies until it changes.'

All day they hung on to the floe, which drifted slowly before the wind. Towards midnight Peter woke up Frazer to tell him that the ice was closing in. And such was the case. The open lead in which the brigantine lay had previously been a mile or so wide. Now floes were beginning to appear one after another, until in the early morning the ship was hemmed in on all sides. John watched

the motion of the ice anxiously, for while the ship was sturdy enough for all ordinary purposes, he could not be quite certain how she would withstand the slow crushing impact of a floe.

At six o'clock Tony was awakened out of a restless sleep by a grinding, ripping sound just by his head. He put his hand out and felt the ship's side come inwards quite perceptibly. By the time he got on deck the danger was past, and the marauder had rebounded and lay quiescent a foot or two clear of the hull. Dicky was on the floe looking for damage.

'Only a few splinters off the surface,' he shouted. 'Nothing sprung at all.'

The floe was moving away again, and he had to make a flying jump at the rope ladder hung over the ship's side. The blow had been a heavy one, and John felt reassured at the behaviour of the hull. In after days such impacts were to become so common as to arouse no comment.

'She gave a bit, did she?' said John, on hearing Tony's story. 'So much the better. An iron ship would probably be punctured in no time, but the give in the timbers and planking is all in our favour.'

In the afternoon John told the boys that they could go for a run on the floe to which the ship

was moored; the inaction was growing irksome and he wanted to avoid staleness at all costs. Tony and Peter dropped on to the ice and spent an hour exploring the immediate neighbourhood. After scrambling a quarter of a mile over tumbled masses of ice and pressure ridges thrown up by the conflict of opposing movements, they came to the further edge of the floe and found their progress stopped by a narrow lead of water; they turned to the left and worked round in a semicircle towards the ship. Everywhere huge blocks of snow-covered ice were reared up on edge, or balanced in precarious piles, forming tiny ice caverns into which the sunlight filtered through translucent walls. By using their combined strength the boys dislodged a fragment, breaking it into pieces, which, devoid of snow, lighted up with a clear radiant blue.

‘Let’s sweep this smooth bit and slide on it,’ shouted Peter when they were near the ship again.

Tony shook his head. ‘I’ve tried already. Winter sports no go here. If only we had a pair of skis we could have some fun.’

But their equipment did not include such articles, and they had to make shift with rough-and-tumble exercises. Dicky joined them, and they wrestled and fought till they perspired in the cold air.

For three days the wind was light and baffling, and the ship remained at her berth. On the morning of the fourth day the temperature dropped, and by noon the water in the little bays and fissures was freezing over. Later on even the wider leads had a skin of ice, and Peter and Tony watched with interest the curious formations on the surface, so different from the fresh-water ice of their experience. Slushy disks as big as soup plates covered the water, their edges turned back and thickened by contact with one another. Half a dozen of these disks would knit together and become semi-rigid, forming a miniature floe. Another aggregation would take place, and the new floe would be twenty feet across and perhaps four inches thick, but still slushy and without strength.

‘Why don’t the big floes remain soft like these?’ Tony asked of John.

‘I believe when they thicken up and rise above the water the salt drains out and leaves hard fresh ice. You’ll find that ice on the top of pressure-ridges doesn’t taste salty at all.’

John spoke with a preoccupied air and more than a shade of anxiety on his brow; each day his position fix had shown that the ship was drifting north-east, and a severe frost was the last thing he wished to see. So far he had kept his knowledge

to himself in the hope that a sudden turn of affairs would bring the ship clear of the pack.

'The sealers use old ice for their drinking water,' he went on, 'but we won't be reduced to that for a time yet.'

Stored for a prolonged scientific trip, the brigantine was indeed well found in food and water, the more so since her crew had been halved by the loss of the shore party, and Marchmont, who still presided in the galley, dealt out rations with a free hand. John, however, had a fair knowledge of the history of Arctic voyages, and knew the danger of being carried into the treacherous waters to the eastward. If another week brought no change, he decided, it would be necessary to cut down the luxuries on which they were living, and go on to a diet of plain fare.

After a night of bitter cold a breeze sprang up from the south. All day long the boys tried in vain to take advantage of it; frozen in with her head north, the brigantine could not be freed by any device within their compass. Headsails were set, warps run out from the bows to adjoining floes, young ice cut across with axes, all to no purpose. In the evening the wind, never strong, died out once more.

Next morning the sleepers below were awakened

by loud crashes on the deck, and coming up to investigate, found that a thaw had set in. Peter, who was on watch, was sheltering in the deck-house; outside, icicles rained down from the rigging, covering the decks with jagged fragments.

'The first one got me on the back of the neck,' Peter explained.

'Serves you right,' said Tony. 'Now, any decent watchman would have fielded them as they fell and let the watch below sleep in peace.'

Just as he finished speaking a lump of ice two feet long dropped from the cross-trees and shattered on the fife-rail beside him. He jumped back and landed heavily on Dicky's toes. The latter grunted and retreated into the house.

Further aft John was studying the weather and made up his mind suddenly.

'All hands to make sail,' he shouted, and disregarding the possible hazards, the boys jumped aloft and loosed the topsails. In an hour the brigantine was heading south with the westerly breeze abeam. For a mile she ran briskly on her course, then the open water ended and she entered a cul-de-sac. John tried to tack ship, intending to stand back and look for an opening, but when the vessel was in stays she collided with a piece of ice, lost way, and fell broadside against a floe. There

she remained all day, pressed against the ice by the wind. That night to the younger boys came some realization of the true nature of the struggle in which they were engaged, and the vast floes and ice-fields, which up till then had been mostly a source of wonder and delight, began to reveal themselves as something hostile and threatening to human life. So long as the wind remained unfavourable they could do nothing to free themselves; the brigantine, handy enough in ordinary circumstances, could not turn to windward in these narrow leads where there was no room for her to gather way. It was with an odd sense of bafflement that they watched the open stretches ruffled by a breeze which should have carried them along at a good six knots, but of which they were for the time being quite powerless to take advantage.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEAR

FRAZER went towards the chart-room, sextant in hand; for the first time in three days he had obtained an observation of the sun at noon. Loitering about the galley door, Tony plucked up his courage and addressed him.

‘How are we progressing?’

‘Can’t say till I’ve worked it out.’

John’s answer was curt and Tony felt rebuffed. He wandered to the rail and looked out aimlessly over the now familiar yet ceaselessly changing pack. Five minutes later John came to his elbow.

‘You might as well know, and the others too. Come inside.’

The boys crowded into the little den. On the chart were a number of dots joined by a pencilled line. The line followed a zig-zag course, but its general trend was obvious at a glance.

‘Twenty-two days now since we entered the pack,’ Frazer began. ‘On sixteen days we have been under sail, and we have lost over two hundred miles of ground. That’s the position.’

‘It sounds rather serious,’ said Dicky.

‘What it means is this,’ John went on. ‘So far we

have been trying to save the ship and ourselves. Now we must make up our minds, should the opportunity arise, to abandon the *Widgeon* and look after our own persons. If we had spoken that sealer we saw last week she would have given us a passage to Norway. Doubtless she will report us there, which will be a relief to the pater. But the next vessel we meet means good-bye to the brigantine.'

There was silence. Tony was the first to break it.

'Then I hope', he said, 'that we don't meet one for a long time. Ships lost in the ice always turn up sooner or later, don't they?'

John laughed. 'Sometimes they don't. But we still have two months before the summer's over, and July and August are the months when the ice retreats farthest. Sealers work round Novaya Zemlya quite late. If we had power ourselves we could be in Tromso in a week, even if we had to thread the pack all the way.'

'I should hate losing the ship,' said Dicky.

John nodded. 'It would be hard, but the pater wouldn't hesitate in the choice, you may be certain.'

'A sealer couldn't tow us, could it?' asked Peter.

'I'm afraid not. Still, there's a chance of that.'

'Mighty ignominious it would be,' Tony grunted.

'Of course, if we meet open water,' Frazer continued, 'we'll make the most of it, but all the same we must get used to the idea of letting the ship go.'

Later on the younger boys were seated in the galley where they were wont to gather in the evenings, if evenings they could be called. For more than a week now the sun had never been below the horizon, and it was often brighter at midnight than at noon. As Peter put it, the distinction between day and night was that you ate rather more in the one period, and slept rather more in the other, but there was very little in it either way.

'What's to hinder us spending the winter up here?' he was saying now. 'We've got rations to last us out in some sort of way.'

'Can't be done,' Tony replied. 'We'd be nipped for certain unless we got close to the land. So far as I could see on the chart, we're not a great distance from Novaya Zemlya.'

'Is it inhabited?' asked Marchmont.

'Only occasionally visited, I think, by trappers.'

'Shouldn't mind wintering there. By Jove! I had no idea that we'd been getting north-east all this

time. I thought we must be close to Europe again and that the ice was coming down with us.'

Tony nodded. 'It was a surprise to me. No wonder Frazer's been getting a bit short lately. He's got the whole thing on his shoulders. All the same, I should hate being taken home in a sealer. Like nurse coming along with the pram.

He got up and leant against the doorway with his back to the other two. Suddenly he bent double, and put his finger to his lips.

'Hullo! have you gone potty?'

'Shut up,' whispered Tony. 'Have a look over the bulwarks. Easy does it.'

Peter stood up cautiously, turned his head, and gasped. Not twenty yards from the ship a polar bear was standing on the ice, staring, it seemed, straight at the galley, its head well back and swaying from side to side, the nostrils dilating noiselessly. Against the snow its shaggy coat looked yellow, and made a startling contrast with the surroundings; the massive strength of the whole animal poised awkwardly on a pressure-ridge came as a shock in the desolation and lifelessness of the scene.

'Fancy things like that wandering about,' Peter whispered. He crawled along out of sight to the

companion way, and called John and Dicky. The bear had not moved. For five minutes, crouching behind the bulwarks, they watched it while it examined the ship, advancing with infinite caution a step at a time. It came at length to the rope by which the bows were moored to the ice. At the same moment a slight breeze caught the ship so that she moved gently astern. The rope tautened up almost under the bear's nose; Peter could not repress a chuckle at the creature's alarm as it jumped back. A second later it had turned tail and was trundling away over the floe.

'Get a rifle, Dicky, and after it,' Frazer cried. 'We need fresh meat. You go along with him, Tony.'

They were over the side in a twinkling, Tony only waiting to borrow Peter's long knife, while Dicky loaded up. When they mounted the first pressure-ridge, they saw the bear a hundred yards away, but before Dicky could take aim it had dropped out of sight behind a hummock. The boys ran panting over the rough surface, following the bear's tracks easily in the snow, scrambling over tumbled heaps of ice, skirting pools of unfrozen water, plunging through deep slush. A few days' thaw had made the pack treacherous, and it

was not long ere Dicky broke through a thin upper layer of ice and sank above the knees. For ten yards he floundered along, the surface giving way below him at every step, but the old ice was firm beneath, and at last he came up with Tony, whose lighter weight had brought him safely over. Presently they had to cross on a narrow neck between two miniature lakes. On one side the ice formed a perfect basin five or six feet deep, the sides sloping smoothly under the clear water to the centre, where a small black circle opened to the sea beneath. Tony shivered at the thought of sliding down the slippery green ice and through the sinister aperture. The bear, however, had no such worries, its tracks showing that it had plunged straight across the pool and scrambled up the other side, apparently without effort.

After twenty minutes the boys drew up breathless; already the ship looked quite far off and insignificant in the icy waste, and the bear had remained invisible since Dicky had first levelled the rifle at it.

‘That fellow can fairly travel,’ he panted. ‘I shouldn’t wonder if he’s a mile away by this time. We’ll go on for another five minutes, and if we don’t see him by that time we’ll chuck it.’

They set off again at a half run, Dicky leading

by a few yards. The pressure-ridges were higher hereabouts, and could not be taken in a stride. Approaching one of these, Dicky put on a spurt to carry him to the top. When he got there he poised for an instant, shouted something indistinguishable, and disappeared down the other side.

Guessing that he had sighted the bear, Tony dashed up the slope, drawing the knife from its sheath as he went. At the summit he stopped in utter astonishment. A few feet below him the floe ended abruptly, so that he had to make an effort to keep his balance; ten yards to the right the bear was ambling towards the water over a low peninsula of ice; Dicky had disappeared without a trace.

For a second Tony was completely nonplussed. When he got back his thinking powers the bear had already approached a few steps towards him, and he grasped the knife in quick alarm. Then in front of him he noticed bubbles rising through the water, and suddenly from the middle of them Dicky's head and shoulders bobbed upwards. The bear hesitated for a moment, its huge head swinging from side to side as though considering which prey was most to its liking; then with a quick spring of the ponderous body it launched itself



THE BEAR HESITATED FOR A MOMENT, ITS HUGE HEAD SWINGING FROM SIDE TO SIDE.

The Bear

III

into the water, straight at Dicky. The splash reached Tony's face and half-blinded him. When he could see clearly again, the animal was swimming with powerful strokes towards the hapless figure in the water.

In desperation Tony looked round for the rifle, but it was not to be seen. He had a momentary picture of it already half-way to the bottom, zig-zagging to and fro as sinking objects do. Opening his mouth, he let out a shriek which seemed to tear his throat, in the hope that the bear was to be frightened off. But it went straight towards its objective in deadly preoccupation, breathing loudly and blowing up little jets of water under its nostrils. Tony could see the long fur rippling from side to side where it was submerged, and the little swirls of water that eddied in its wake. All at once the swimmer's face appeared not a yard from the nose of the bear, and Tony caught the sudden horror of the expression; the beast's mouth opened, exposing gleaming yellow fangs. Tony hesitated no longer. With one leap he cleared the space, the knife held out wide to one side; he landed square astride the shaggy back and fumbled for the head. The unexpected onslaught drove the bear under water with Tony still clinging to it and groping forward. Together they rose, and Tony took aim and plunged

the knife into the neck. It struck something hard, and the bear turned its head to the right, the teeth uncovered and ferocious. The jaws snapped to, an inch from his knee. The knife in his right hand had become useless, and he transferred it to the left, at the same time throwing himself forward and straightening out the threatened limb. Again he struck at the neck, and this time the blade sank till his hand was buried in the wet fur. He was conscious of a sudden convulsion under him, and of the water going blood-red before his eyes. He withdrew the blade and plunged it home again and again. The upheaval beneath him slackened and stopped; the carcass rolled over slowly with a feeble twitching of the paws.

There was a quick gasp near by. Tony caught Dicky by the shoulder and pulled him to the bear, whose body floated strongly on the surface. They clung in silence for a time, changing their grips as the carcass turned over.

'It's quite dead?' said Dicky at last, as though still doubtful.

'Yes,' Tony replied dazedly.

So close had it happened under the ice that he could touch the edge without letting go the bear. He found a foothold and gave a hand to Dicky. Together they climbed on to the floe. Relieved

of its burden, the carcass came up and drifted against the ice-face.

'A near thing,' said Dicky huskily. 'I shall see that head in my dreams all my life.'

He shuddered in his streaming clothes. Tony was wiping the knife with handfuls of snow, spreading gore all about him.

'How are we going to get the brute out of the water?' he asked slowly.

Dicky shook his head. 'It can't be done. We'll slice off some flesh where it lies. That's the best we can do.'

They lay down full length on the edge of the floe and began, Dicky holding the carcass steady while Tony hacked away with inexperienced strokes. At last they had removed some thirty pounds of meat and desisted.

Dicky shuddered again. 'We shan't go back empty-handed anyhow, but I wish I hadn't lost the rifle.'

He climbed up a few steps and turned round.

'When I got here I felt that it would be a job to stop myself going over into the water. Then I saw the bear, missed my foothold and went in, gun and all. The first time I came up I was stupid with the cold and didn't realize anything; the second time the brute was right on me. For

seconds I expected to feel its teeth—for hours it seemed.'

They wrapped the meat up in strips of skin and set out for the ship, their movements much hampered by the drag of their wringing clothes. The air, however, was not cold enough to stiffen the soaked garments with ice, and before they had gone far they overcame their shivering, and reached the ship in a glow. They were met with eager inquiries and shouts of triumph when the fresh meat was unslung and displayed, but the tale which Dicky had to tell speedily damped their high spirits, and caused Frazer at least a thoughtful half-hour.

'We'll have to take more precautions in the future,' he said to Dicky. 'If Tony hadn't been exceptionally quick-witted and active the brute would have had you, without a doubt. We must hunt with two guns after this.'

'There are only three rifles left, aren't there?' said Dicky.

Frazer nodded. 'And one of them throws badly to the left. Still, we can't take risks like that again.'

That evening, for the first time in many days, the stove in the saloon was lighted, the lamps trimmed, and canvas covers put over the skylight

to shut out the rays of the sun. A piece of bear-meat of ample size was roasted and carried below, and amidst what Peter described as barbaric shouts, the boys fell to on the first fresh meat they had tasted since they had been blown off the coast.

CHAPTER IX

THE SECOND STORM

JOHN made ruthless demands on the strength and endurance of his crew when the conditions gave the ship any chance of gaining a few miles southing. Often they would be hard at it for four and twenty hours at a stretch, tacking across short leads, hauling round the yards, making sternboards voluntary or involuntary. On one occasion they worked for a whole day to get the ship into a promising lead, warping her along through the floes, hacking her head out of them with axes when she stuck, and employing every means which their ingenuity could devise to bring her to the opening. When eventually they did so, they ran the length of the clear water in twenty minutes, and found themselves no better off than before. On other days the ice seemed to open up before them to let them through, and sometimes they would gain ten miles without let or hindrance.

But these successes were few and far between, and made but little difference to their general course. By the middle of August the brigantine was well into the current which John knew to run north along the west coast of Novaya Zemlya and

whose deadly strength he had long feared. From that time onwards he definitely gave up all hope of saving the *Widgeon*, and the watch was kept on an improvised crow's-nest at the mast-head with the object of sighting a distant ship whose attention might be attracted. As the season advanced, John held long consultations with Dicky on the advisability of leaving the ship and making a journey over the ice to the land when the frost should tighten up the pack. They calculated that the food they could carry might last out the sledge journey but no further; the prospect of a winter on an inhospitable coast with only the guns to depend on was unattractive. At the same time, Frazer knew that the ship stood no chance when the frost should knit the pack together in earnest.

He spent a day with Marchmont in the store-room at the forward end of the alleyway. The hatches were got off and, pencil and paper in hand, the two made an inventory of the food resources of the ship, while Dicky and Peter handled casks, bags, and cases to get at the under layers. Frazer found that there remained almost a ton of flour, together with two hundredweight of tinned beef, ten bags of potatoes, two casks of salt junk, twenty pounds of butter, and an abundance of tea, sugar, and coffee; besides these were small quantities of

luxuries which would be useful in providing variety to the diet, but which could hardly be counted on to yield much sustenance. Frazer knew that an ample supply of fat was a prime necessity for the cold months, and was somewhat dismayed to find that the supply of suet was running low. Sea-biscuits and oatmeal also were practically exhausted, and it was obvious that the baking of bread must become part of the regular routine. The potatoes were beginning to rot badly in the bags, and John had these carefully sorted out and the remaining sound ones spread on the floor of one of the empty cabins.

When the inspection was over, the stores were built up against the forward bulkhead, leaving a considerable clear space in the after end of the room. On the following day John rigged up a rude bench in this area, and transferring to it the carpenter's tools and equipment, set to work to construct a sledge. When finished it was rather heavy and clumsy, but it was also strong, and would, John thought, stand a good deal of wear and tear. In fine weather, when the ship was moored beside a floe of moderate size, this cumbersome article would be slung on to the ice, and rope harness with canvas chest-straps attached to it; for an hour the boys would pull it here and there

over varying types of surface and with varying loads on board. In this way Frazer reckoned up the maximum weight which it would be advisable to attempt on a sledge journey, and found it disappointingly small.

‘We must have the three rifles and at least five hundred rounds of ammunition; that’s none too much. Two shovels and two axes and some small tools; a good-sized piece of tarpaulin to camp under at first; at least three blankets to each man, not to mention extra clothing—that’s going to account for a fair weight before we think of food. And there’s fuel too.’

‘How far will we have to cart all that stuff?’ asked Dicky.

‘I don’t quite know. At present we’re sixty miles from the land, but before we arrive off the extreme north of the island we may manage to work the ship a good deal closer. I’m hoping to find a deserted hut. At one time sealers frequented the coast quite a lot.’

‘And if we don’t?’

‘I suppose we’ll have to build something pretty substantial. Canvas is not much use in the Arctic winter. But it’s not that that worries me. It’s grub.’

He paused and broke off an icicle hanging from the shrouds.

'It is possible to live on bear-meat alone almost indefinitely, but it makes the chance of illness much greater. And bears may not be so very plentiful.'

'Judging from the tracks on the ice, there doesn't seem to be any scarcity round here,' said Dicky. 'Personally, I've seen quite enough of the tribe to last me a long time.'

John laughed. 'I'm afraid you're going to see a deal more of them in the near future. If not, it's a blue look-out for us all.'

'Suppose we stuck to the ship through thick and thin?'

'Before Christmas I should think we'd find ourselves sitting on an upheaving floe watching her being buckled up and pounded into powder. It will be dark, of course. Anyhow, let's stop jawing and go aloft with the glasses. We may get a sight of the land.'

But there was no break in the panorama of sea and ice except where an occasional seal or walrus lay basking in the sunshine. The boys had already tried eating seal-meat, but the results were not encouraging and seals were allowed to pass unmolested. Presently Dicky went back to the deck and Frazer was left alone. From his airy position in the crow's-nest he saw Tony come out of the

deckhouse, look stealthily about him, then cross to the rail and jump down on to the ice. He was carrying something under his arm the appearance of which puzzled John not a little. It was only when the boy had placed two long black objects parallel on the snow and put his feet on them that John tumbled to the idea. Tony knelt down and fumbled about his feet for some time, then rose upright, pushed off, and went flying away over the floe at a great pace.

'By Jove! I wonder where he learned that,' said John to himself. He watched Tony curving round in a long sweep, making light of minor obstacles and travelling twice as fast as he could have walked. By and by he came back to the ship and handed the skis over to Peter; the latter started off bravely, but only got a few yards when he fell headlong. On deck again, John examined the skis with interest. They had been made from light ash planking, carefully planed down to the proper thickness and grooved along the under side.

'How on earth did you get the tips turned up?' he asked Tony.

'Steam. We've had them over a boiling pot in the galley every middle watch for ages. I've got a pair at home and learned last winter.'

'They might be remarkably useful to us some time.'

'Have a try,' said Tony.

Frazer did so, but met with little more success than Peter.

'We must have regular practice,' he remarked when he returned. 'Perhaps you could turn out another pair?'

Tony nodded, not a little delighted at the success of his efforts. Unhampered by secrecy, he set to work straight away and produced a fresh outfit in a few days. Thereafter ski-running became general, and every afternoon when the weather and ice were suitable races were organized, and run to the hilarity of the onlookers. At first Tony could easily surpass the others, but later Marchmont developed a surprising aptitude for the sport and began to run him close.

In the meantime the ship, completely hemmed in, drifted northward willy-nilly. From the mast-head, however, John could see patches of open water, and dark-coloured clouds on the eastern horizon signified that the ice was by no means continuous. It was but seldom now that the temperature came above freezing-point, and the fresh-water pools of melted ice and snow which had formed on the pack were glazed over with a thick, smooth skin. When tired of ski-running, the boys would slide for hours on these ponds,

until, as Dicky declared, they had slid further than most people walked in a lifetime.

Earlier in the summer the weather had been foggy and depressing, but now, as the hopes of return or rescue were disappearing, the sun shone steadily the twenty-four hours round, and high spirits prevailed. John did all he could to prevent sluggishness; daily tasks were allotted and regular meals cooked and served. In order to lighten Marchmont's work, either Peter or Tony assisted him after every meal, and the galley and utensils were kept spotless.

On the 3rd of September a change occurred whose significance at first was lost on the boys. The sky clouded over and a southerly wind began to blow, rising soon to gale strength. For four days it continued while the ship, buffeted aloft and bruised below, moved slowly with the pack. After the spaciousness of the past few weeks the confinement was very irksome, especially as the ship was quite unworkable and made no demand for attention beyond a vigilant look-out. On the fifth day the sky cleared and John 'shot' the sun. Later, in the chart-room, he pored over his figures, checking them time and again and seeking in every direction for a possible error. It was with something like consternation that he faced the facts at

last, and even then he had a great secret hope that some mistake in manipulation had upset the sextant reading.

He said nothing to Dicky of his fears, waiting for another observation to confirm or falsify his conclusions. It was not until two anxious days had passed that the sun showed again, and when the opportunity came John found difficulty in steadying himself for the effort.

His worst fears were verified. During the gale the combined effect of wind and current had carried the ship to the north, far out of reach of the land. The journey which a week ago had been a feasible proposition was now out of the question. John put the ship's position on the chart and reviewed the situation. Some hundreds of miles to the north-west the bleak, uninhabited shores of Franz Josef Land; to the south the now inaccessible Novaya Zemlya; eastward and north-eastward a blank stretch of uncharted, unexplored sea. Whither would they drift now?

He peered at the blank whiteness of the chart as though by hard scrutiny he might divine the nature of these eastern waters. As leader of the little party he felt his responsibility heavily and shrank from breaking the news to his followers. The only hope that he could put forward was that the ship might

drift to Franz Josef Land before she was crushed by the pack, and this hope he knew to be a slender one. The idea of setting off in the ship's boat had occurred to him once or twice before, but the perils were such that it seemed to be courting certain death, and again he dismissed the scheme. The pack, too open for sledging, was too compact for even a small boat to penetrate.

For the first time since the loss of the shore party the desperation of their plight preyed upon Frazer, and he sat long in the chart-room fighting off the crushing sensation. When at last he stepped out into the cold air, he had reconciled himself to the facts and could present them to the others without revealing his own acute anxiety.

'So we'll have to stick to the ship after all,' cried Peter. 'I'm jolly glad. I believe she's unsinkable.'

'We'll make the North-east Passage and come out at the Behring Straits and home by the South Sea Islands,' Tony remarked.

And indeed the younger boys had disliked the idea of abandoning the *Widgeon* and were undismayed at the new turn of affairs. It was in vain that John pointed out the dangers which beset them; even the prospect of, later on, having to watch the ship broken up by ice pressure did

not damp their spirits at present, and it was with a much lighter heart that their leader dismissed his crew and went aloft to look in vain for a ship.

'Now we can get down to preparations for the winter on board,' said Tony. 'I suppose we'll all have to sleep together in the saloon for warmth. I'm going to make a sleeping-bag, and some light canvas clothes for wind protection.'

There was no lack of material for his enterprise, and John encouraged the others to follow his example. Every evening the boys gathered in the saloon for what Peter called the sewing-bee.

'Don't you think your stitches are just a little bit too large, Miss Thorpe?' he would remark. Or, 'Could you let me have the shape for that pull-over you're making? I'm sure Miss Fielding's nose is going redder this winter.'

'Not so red as yours will be in a minute if you don't shut up.'

'It's her digestion, poor thing. She only pecks at her food.'

Peter made himself a complicated piece of head-gear with ear and nose flaps, but as it never fitted tightly at more than one place at a time, and, as even he admitted, formed a pocket of cold air at the back of his neck, he had perforce to discard it, satisfying himself with a woollen helmet covered

over with canvas. Dicky specialized in sewing two similar garments together with a layer of cotton wool between, a plan which worked well until the cotton wool broke loose and gathered into rucks at awkward places.

John abstained from the sewing craze, saying that when the others had discovered the most suitably shaped garments, he would make himself a set in bearskins.

CHAPTER X

NEW WATERS

FOUR days after the gale subsided, the ship, drifting eastward, passed beyond the position of the last sounding on the chart, and floated on the waters of an unknown sea.

‘It doesn’t look any different,’ said Peter, ‘but it’s extraordinary all the same to feel that no one has ever been here before.’

He and Tony were seated on a sloping bank of ice which ran down to a smooth, snowy square patch, exactly resembling a lawn. A hundred yards away the brigantine lay serenely in the sun, the black hull ice-coated about the waterline, the tall masts stately as ever, supporting snow-laden spars which sparkled and glittered at a million tiny facets.

‘Impossible to imagine her sinking,’ said Tony. ‘I’ve been thinking a lot about it lately and wondering what could be done to save her. Now if we were to take the ballast out of her she might rise to a nip and sit on the ice. It has been done before, of course, with ships specially built for the purpose.’

'But even if she did,' objected Peter, 'we couldn't sail her afterwards without ballast. She would be no better than a raft.'

'Quite so, but the main object is to preserve her through the winter.'

He paused and waved his hand towards the flat surface in front of him.

'Now *that* has come through a winter or part of a winter undamaged. If we were lucky enough to be frozen in on such a piece we would never be disturbed. Pure chance, of course. On the other hand, if the hull met pressure such as caused this hump we're sitting on, it would either be crushed or driven upwards. Driven upwards would be preferable.'

'You mean, better an unballasted ship than no ship at all.'

'Precisely, you fathead. Anyhow, we could always ballast her with ice. It would last indefinitely up here, last us back to a port, too, when we got a chance of making for one. This drift is almost bound to set us near land sometime.'

He dug his heels into the crisp snow so that little glistening showers flew up. Overhead an ivory gull was fluttering about and settled at last behind them. Peter looked round, then nudged Tony in

the ribs and whispered, 'Here's an old friend come to visit.'

At their backs quite near by a bear was regarding them intently.

'Let's beat it,' said Tony.

The boys slid cautiously down the slope, and set out on tiptoes for the ship. Before they had covered more than a few yards, however, they were overcome by a sudden panic, and throwing caution to the winds, made off at full speed. Peter had the sensation of snapping jaws just behind him, and redoubled his efforts. The ship's side loomed up high and unscaleable. Together they sprang at it, but Peter missed his grip and slipped back on to the ice. He opened his eyes with an effort, expecting the bear to close with him at once. But there was nothing to be seen but snow and ice. Above him Dicky was leaning negligently over the rail.

'What's the game?' he remarked. 'Can I join in?'

Peter rose to his feet with some dignity.

'It's a bear. He was after us.'

Dicky shaded his eyes and looked at the horizon.

'Can't see anything. Did he chase you far?'

‘Not very. He’s behind that ridge.’

Tony reappeared with a rifle. For five minutes nothing happened, and Peter was beginning to wonder if he had imagined the whole thing, when at last the bear’s head and shoulders came into view. Tony dispatched it with one careful shot.

It took the combined efforts of all five to drag the huge animal over the floe. When it was alongside Peter and Tony were told off to skin it, while under John’s instructions Marchmont prepared a pot in which to render down the fat. When the skin had been removed the carcass was slung up in the main rigging where it would keep indefinitely in the cold air; a cask was placed outside the galley door, and into this the lard was flung so that Marchmont could treat it at his leisure when the fire was not needed for cooking. Late that night he was to be seen bending over an oily swimming cauldron whose contents made the whole ship reek of fishiness.

The meat, however, was much inferior to that of the previous kill.

‘It must be the father of all bears,’ commented John. ‘Next time you make up to a bear, Peter, choose a younger one. Besides, it would make a

more sporting event to watch. Dicky tells me you won hands down.'

But despite his jest, Frazer made it a rule from that time that no one should leave the ship unarmed, and even when exercising alongside a rifle was always kept handy. Later on, with more practice and care, it was found possible to cook bearsteaks so that they were quite tender and palatable, and for many days the boys lived on the frozen carcase. By dint of patience, Marchmont was able at last to exhibit proudly two buckets of clear bear oil, which was zealously stowed away in a cask against the time when low temperatures would bring to the boys a craving for fatty food.

One evening the cook approached Frazer with a scheme which he had been nursing to himself for some time.

'Now that we are in unknown waters,' he said, 'wouldn't it be a good thing if we did a little dredging? This part of the sea-bottom has never been touched, and anything we did here would be doubly valuable. I'm willing to take on the preserving work.'

'Good idea,' Frazer approved. 'We'll make a start right away.' He was glad to have some new activity for the boys, although in his heart of

hearts he saw but little chance of any specimens which they took ever reaching civilization. Next morning at breakfast he announced the new programme, and selected Peter to take Marchmont's place in the galley. Dredge-nets and tow-nets were brought on deck, and before midday the first haul came in over the stern from two hundred fathoms, a strange collection of starfish, crabs, and weird misshapen organisms all mixed up in grey slimy ooze. Marchmont spent the rest of the day sorting out his catch, washing it and pickling it in alcohol and formalin.

Just before dinner Dicky went below to see the young zoologist in the laboratory.

'I say, there's something floating quite close to the ship which might interest you. Looks like a jellyfish. Might be a valuable specimen.'

Marchmont was on deck in a twinkling. A cream-coloured sphere five or six inches in diameter was resting almost against the ship's side, turning over slowly. A curious oily exudation seemed to come from it, and even as he watched Marchmont was certain that the creature moved of its own volition.

'Keep your eye on it while I get a net,' he cried to Dicky. When he returned with the net fixed on a long pole, the object had drifted or moved

away a few feet, and was almost beyond his reach. He leant over the side and stretched out.

From the galley door Peter, very red-faced, was watching the operations. He advanced to the rail.

'What on earth are you doing?' he began; then, catching sight of the sphere, grew silent. John and Tony, at work by the skylight, crossed the deck and joined the others. They hung over the rail while Marchmont made repeated efforts with the net.

'It may be like jelly and go all to pieces when I lift it,' he said, but a moment later the specimen was hanging in mid-air, intact. Apparently uninterested, Peter had gone back to his stove, but he was keeping an eye on the group nevertheless. He saw the eagerness suddenly leave Marchmont's face, and heard a guffaw from Dicky. Then a roar of laughter went up, and the boys turned on him like one man.

They seized him and dragged him bodily from the galley, then held the offending duff within an inch of his nose.

'Make him eat it,' cried Dicky. 'He should have owned up at once.'

Peter struggled vainly to escape the proximity of the greasy, sodden mass.

'What are we going to have for dinner now?'

inquired Tony balefully. 'He may kill us all yet, as he meant to kill the seagulls.'

'I thought it was certain to sink,' spluttered Peter. 'Perhaps it was quite eatable after all.'

Another howl of abuse greeted this.

'Where's the rest of the dinner? Has it gone the same way?'

'It will do if you don't let go,' yelled Peter. 'Can't you smell the potatoes burning?'

They released him at that, and he retired a trifle dishevelled to the galley. That night, throwing himself down incautiously on his bunk, his cheek buried itself in something soft and sticky; he was too exhausted, however, by the trials of the day to do anything but drop the man-handled duff into the berth below where Tony was already asleep.

Dredging was continued for two days until an event occurred which broke in upon the routine of the ship's company and upset all normal proceedings. It was Frazer's custom to spend the hour before midday aloft, that period usually being the clearest and most propitious for looking around. To the eastward something moving on the pack caught his eye, and he focused the glasses carelessly upon it. As he had surmised, it was a bear pursuing a lonely and tortuous course among the

ups and downs of the icefield. The movements of the animal interested him, and he took a rag from his pocket and wiped the lenses.

He put up the glasses once more and looked for the bear; by an error he aimed too high, and sighted something on the horizon which made his heart stand still. With trembling hands he focused the glasses to the longer range and looked again. There was little doubt about it: a black pinnacle of some kind protruded above the line of the pack; even without the glasses he could see something faint and far off.

‘Dicky! Up aloft here, old son.’

When Dicky reached the top-gallant yard John pointed out the bear.

‘Now look just above it and tell me if you see anything.’

Dicky stared. ‘By Jove!’ he said slowly, ‘there is a queer darkness—let’s have the glasses.’

There was not room for both in the crow’s-nest, and Frazer slid down to the yard.

‘It’s land,’ pronounced Dicky.

‘Land it is. Undiscovered land. Now nip down to the standard compass and get a bearing if possible.’

But from the deck Dicky could see nothing, and only an estimate of the direction could be made.

The younger boys crowded aloft and gazed eagerly to the north-east.

‘It looks like a low rock just sticking out of the sea,’ said Tony. ‘How far away do you suppose it is?’

‘Can’t say,’ replied Frazer. ‘If it is a low rock, then it may be quite near, but I’m inclined to think it is the summit of fairly high land a long way off—perhaps fifty or sixty miles. And it may not be a peak at all, but just a bare patch showing up against snow-clad mountains.’

‘There’s nothing to be seen to left or right, anyhow,’ remarked Dicky, ‘but the sky is so white that a snow-clad mountain would be invisible against it.’

More fascinated by the distant speck than by crowded cities and fertile valleys, the boys could hardly tear themselves from aloft. For half an hour the five of them hung on the yard, making all kinds of hazards and conjectures, until at last the icy wind began to tell, and one by one they descended to the deck from whence nothing could be seen.

In the afternoon the appearance of land had gone, which seemed to confirm John’s view that it was many miles from the ship. By the evening a mild scepticism had set in, Peter declaring that

what they had seen was a dark cleft in an iceberg. Dicky conceded that it might be so.

'Anyhow, we haven't noticed an iceberg looking like that before, and there's no reason why it shouldn't be land,' argued Tony.

'If it is land, do we make for it?' asked Marchmont.

John nodded grimly. He had taken no part in the discussion, the possibility of an error throwing him into suspense too acute for idle words. The twelve hours which intervened before the return of good visibility lay in front of him like an eternity. He left the saloon and went on deck. It was ten o'clock and the sun was just below the horizon. In another month's time, John reflected, the days would have shortened to a few hours, and biting frosts such as they had experienced in the first blizzard would prevail day and night, with the prospect of worse to come. Even on land the Arctic winter was enough to strike terror into the heart of the stoutest, and Frazer knew that under the most favourable conditions it would require all his foresight to preserve his crew through the dark months.

For two hours he paced the deck under the chilly starlight, thinking over the possibilities of the future. After the long weeks in the ice, he could

calculate to a nicety the behaviour of his shipmates in any given circumstances. Marchmont was willing and keen, but tired quickly and was inclined to overestimate his fatigue. Peter would go on till he dropped so long as he was working shoulder to shoulder, but essentially he required the moral support of companions. On Tony, Frazer knew, he could count to the last inch, and could count also on his acuteness and intelligence. Frazer's heart warmed at the thought of Tony and Dicky, a strangely contrasted pair, yet combining between them every asset that could be desired in the long struggle to come. But it was with himself that rested the decisions that would give his followers the chance to use their faculties to the utmost, and to this end he must be everlastingly on the alert. Since the end of the gale which had driven the ship clear of Novaya Zemlya, she had been tied up to the same floe, drifting eastward on the ocean current. Although leads of open water had presented themselves from time to time, there had been no object in sailing along them, the light southerly wind precluding the possibility of advance in a useful direction. Now the chance of land to the north-east altered the outlook entirely, and John had to reckon up what course he had best pursue, taking into account the scanty observations

of prevailing wind and tide which he had made himself in this unknown region. Presently he roused out Marchmont for his watch and disappeared into the chart-room, where a light glowed all through the dark hours.

CHAPTER XI

DISTANT LAND

THE morning came with a misty white bank of clouds all round the horizon; the sun, hanging low and red in the south-east, seemed to the boys unable to break up the heavy pall which rested on the pack.

‘Bah! It’s always like this in the morning,’ said Tony. ‘Let’s give up watching it and have breakfast.’

But even he could not stay long below, and with the others only snatched his food before going aloft once more. Towards eleven o’clock the mist thinned and excitement became intense. Slowly the visibility increased, and distant ice-pinnacles and bergs grew up on the horizon.

‘We should see it by now, if it’s there,’ declared Tony, perched astride the yard and flapping his arms to keep the blood moving.

‘The ship has swung a bit in the last hour,’ said Dicky, arriving from the deck and compass. ‘It should lie about two points on the starboard bow.’

The boys who had been looking out broad on the beam swung round and stared in silence.

‘I can see it all right,’ said John quietly, and

handed over the glasses. But there was no need for them. Even as he spoke the sun fell on the distant black shape, and it sprang up sharp and clear-cut and unmistakable in its character.

Dicky passed back the binoculars.

'There's a cliff with a lot of loose rubble at the foot of it. Have you got it?'

'Yes. There's no doubt at all. You can see the ice-face just beyond. It's land for certain.'

He paused for a time, then lowered the glasses.

'We'll get under way at once. Peter and Marchmont, get the ice-anchors on board. Loose the topsails!'

In an instant all was activity. As he spied out the course likely to take the ship farthest through the pack, Frazer could hear Tony and Dicky chuckling breathlessly on the yard below him; armed with a pick-axe, Peter was chipping the anchors out of the solid ice and throwing a glistening shower of fragments all around him. Frazer slid down to the deck.

'Run the for'ard anchor away ahead so that we can warp her into the lead. Aboard to the windlass, Marchmont. Are you ready aloft?'

'Ay, ay.'

The ship came ahead slowly with the yards braced up sharp. When she had gathered way,

Frazer put the wheel up and dropped a ladder over the side. As the hull passed, Peter jumped for it, caught the swinging rungs, and tumbled in over the rail. Another minute and the headsails filled, then the topsails quivered gently in the breeze and swelled outwards; the brigantine increased her speed and slipped along between the floes heading eastward.

For two hours she made good progress, breaking through a light obstruction here and there in her path. Then the floes became tighter and more difficult to jostle aside, and early in the afternoon the ship met a barrier which she failed to pass, and came to rest. Later on a sharp frost set in and began to glue together the floes. By nine o'clock the temperature had dropped to zero and the atmosphere had taken on a queer hardness, as though transformed to rigidity by the cold.

'If we are frozen in here for good, we could make the land over the ice, I suppose,' said Dicky.

'Yes, I reckon we could,' replied Frazer. 'It's a warning to us not to waste time, anyhow.'

By next morning, however, some trick of the current had loosened the pack, and the young ice, unsupported by mature floes, offered no serious resistance. The wind, very light from the west, wafted the ship gently towards her objective. The

land was again in view, and John was now able to gauge their progress.

‘As things are,’ he said to Dicky, ‘we’ll be carried past the coast on the south side. We must work north all we can and let the drift do the rest.’

They were aloft scanning the network of channels and dead-ends ahead. Not far distant a lake of open water stretched away in the desired direction, and Frazer was concentrating all his faculties on bringing the ship into it.

Inch by inch she crept closer, twisting and turning as much as the light wind would let her, grating against the ice, pushing loose floes aside, occasionally toppling over high blocks grown top-heavy by the summer’s thaw.

‘By Jove! I can’t see any way through,’ exclaimed Dicky. ‘There seems to be an unbroken margin of ice all round.’

‘We’ve got to get through somehow,’ responded Frazer. ‘A chance like this won’t happen again.’ He shouted an order to the helmsman, then resumed: ‘I’m heading for the narrowest neck. If we don’t carry it before us we must cut a channel for the ship. I wish we had another couple of knots on her!’

The bowsprit nosed its way onwards, gliding above floes which moved with the ship for a time,

then passed along her sides and were left behind. When the end of the spar was almost over the open water, the brigantine stopped with a soft thud, rebounded slightly, went ahead again, and became motionless.

Frazer dropped down on the deck and looked over the bows.

‘It’s not so very thick. We’ll have a meal and set to work.’

Throughout lunch numerous suggestions were made as to the best means of breaking through the few yards of ice at the forefoot.

‘Couldn’t we light a fire on it and melt it away?’ said Marchmont.

‘Or blow it up with gunpowder?’

‘Or drive pegs of dry wood into it and wet them, as they used to do to break stones in the Middle Ages?’

John laughed. ‘I’m afraid there’s nothing for it but elbow-grease. Still, we’ll see what can be done.’

Tony and Dicky led off one on each side of the narrow stretch, wielding their axes lustily. They found no difficulty in cutting down to sea level, but when the water welled into the openings and flew up at each stroke it was a different matter.

As he was dumping the ashes from the galley fire, Peter paused for a minute to look on.

'Having a bath?' he inquired, as a particularly heavy splash leapt up in Tony's face. He was about to elaborate the theme when Frazer called him aft. Within ten minutes he was heartily envying the others working outside in the sunlight. Stowed amidships in the hold were a great number of iron pigs which formed part of the ballast. Frazer took up two planks from the floor of the alleyway and showed Peter where they lay.

'Now, get twenty of them up on deck as quick as you can.'

Before Peter had finished his knees and elbows were raw, and he was covered with rust from head to foot. In the meantime Frazer and Marchmont had rigged a stout tackle to the fore-yardarm, and tightened up the lifts. The pigs of iron were lashed securely together, forming a compact body some four hundred pounds in weight, and attached to the tackle by a strop.

'We want to push her head off and bring her broadside to the floe,' Frazer explained. He led the way, and slowly the ship was moved into the required position.

'Now then, up she goes! Lay back on it! Stand from under.'

The mass of iron lifted from the deck, swung outwards, and ascended slowly to the yardarm.

'How's that?'

'Slack up a little on the starboard brace. That'll do.'

Tony jumped into the rigging, transferred himself to the foreyard, and reached the yardarm.

'Are you ready?' he shouted with a flourish of his knife.

Frazer took a final look, then gave the word. One slash of the keen blade, and the weight, falling forty feet, struck the floe at its weakest point. There was a resounding, splintering crash; the mass of iron remained for an instant in view, then sank through the shattered ice and disappeared. The whip-back of the yard had dislodged Tony from his perch so that he hung upside down on the foot-ropes like a fly.

'All right?' shouted Frazer.

With a well-timed effort Tony swung himself upwards and regained his position.

'All right,' he nodded.

'That has done the trick,' said Dicky as he reached the spot. The floe had cracked across, and even as the boys watched, the severed portions began to move apart. A quarter of an hour later the ship edged through the fissure and came on to her course with open water ahead as far as the eye could reach.

For a time the land remained in sight, but as the afternoon advanced a strange white mist began to gather, slowly diminishing the visibility. When at the change of watches the boys crowded into the galley as usual for tea, there was nothing to be seen but the sullen dark water about the ship, hardly ruffled by the dying breeze. All evening the vessel drifted in the icy vapour, now and again encountering brash-ice or isolated floes. Suddenly in front of her a looming shape appeared, seeming to grow and expand as the ship advanced. Frazer sheered the brigantine sharp to starboard, and she passed so close that the yards almost scraped the clear ice-face.

‘Look there!’ cried Frazer, pointing. ‘That berg’s aground in shallow water. You can see the current rippling past quite strong. Go aft and try a cast.’

Dicky did so. The sounding machine whirred for a few seconds, then stopped.

‘What have you got?’

‘Thirty-five fathoms.’

‘All right. Rouse out the watch and get the anchor ready.’

As the daylight faded, the fog drifted up in heavier banks, muffling the sounds about the ship, and carrying with it a raw bitter cold; every spar,

rope, and plank was covered with thick white rime, and the canvas, no longer distended by the wind, stiffened in queer unnatural folds. From the compass Frazer deduced that the ship was drifting broadside with the current, but she had ceased to move through the water, and would not answer her helm. Over the sea the dark pall of vapour hung dense and unbroken, obscuring equally the promises of safety or danger; only above the mast-heads a faint luminosity came and went in weird silent changes. Once John, looking upwards, saw a single star twinkling brightly for the space of a quarter of a minute.

Wrapped about in this strange blanket, the boys spoke only in whispers as though fearful of disturbing the silence which brooded heavily beyond the ship. Forward by the long-disused fo'c'sle hatch, Peter was standing quite still, lost in semi-conscious dreams. Once on a night such as this he had crossed the English Channel, and before the dawn the steamer had hung helplessly outside Newhaven, rolling gently in the enshrouding fog. He might be there now, he thought, if he could forget the intense cold. He could imagine the occasional pulse of the engines, the lighted warm interior at his elbow, the whole organization and life of a modern steamer, the railway journey to come, the

arrival in London. For a moment he was lost in unreality, and swayed slightly where he stood. A feeling of relief came to him, as if he had escaped from some haunting dream. Then the ship dipped her head three times in response to the ghost of some ancient, invisible swell, and he woke up. The vision vanished, and the sense of isolation, weariness, and danger rolled in over him like an advancing wave.

On the others also the strain of the night was beginning to tell. Now and then the movement of the ship caused the boom to swing from one side to the other, creaking loudly at the mast and rattling the heavy blocks.

'Take a pull on the main-sheet,' said Frazer at last in sudden exasperation. After he had pronounced the words he had the sensation of having spoken in an enclosed space, the fog throwing back his voice on all sides. Two of the boys went aft, and he could hear them shuffling vaguely about and the sound of a rope creaking in the sheaves, but no sign of them could be seen in the blackness. Half an hour later Tony pointed over the stern.

'Looks like the dawn coming now.'

Frazer gazed fixedly. There was a distinct break in the uniform darkness, a lessening of the gloom;

but as they watched the appearance of light passed slowly to one side and was gone. John shivered slightly.

‘Another berg,’ he said. ‘We must have been quite close.’

Towards three o’clock a faint air stirred in the rigging and the ship glided forward noiselessly. Soon afterwards daylight came, and with it an increased sense of cold. The grey pitiless fog drove across the ship, stinging their faces and numbing their limbs; each struggle with the stiffened ropes made the hands tingle agonizingly.

And then in a flash the change came. The mist lifted, and not a mile away to the north over a berg-strewn sea, the land reared itself up to the skies, an immense brooding structure of rock and ice, lofty and gaunt and forbidding.

The boys stood silent, overawed by the stark terraced cliffs, the cruel faces of rock, the tumbled heaps of rubble and boulder, the barren desolation, the almost supernatural hostility of the whole coast. There was nothing here to remind them of lands they had known, nothing to refresh the eye, nothing suggestive of a haven. On either side of the bare cliffs ahead the coast was buried under an ice-cap which broke off abruptly into the sea in sheer precipices of blue ice. The water all along

the unbroken shores and cliffs was littered with bergs, large and small, afloat and adrift.

Instinctively the boys drew closer together. It was Dicky who first found his voice.

‘Perhaps it’ll look better when we’ve had a rest,’ he said, with an uncertain laugh. Frazer did not reply. For days he had thought of nothing but how best to reach the land, and now that he had achieved his end he felt repulsed and chilled. By comparison with the cold enmity of the coast, the months passed in the pack-ice seemed homely and pleasant. But there was no going back; the period of security among the drifting floes was at an end. The ship must be worked into some channel or harbour where the ice which formed around her would remain undisturbed throughout the winter. With an effort he roused himself, set his crew to work to trim the yards afresh, and going to the wheel put the ship on her course eastward, parallel to the ice-cliffs.

CHAPTER XII

THE SINKING SHIP

ALL day the ship cruised slowly along the coast, catching puffs of wind which came down fitfully from the high land and ice-cap. The unbroken frontage presented no haven such as Frazer looked for, and when nightfall came he decided to anchor in the open and give his crew a chance to make up arrears of sleep.

‘It’s not exactly welcoming us with open arms,’ he said to Dicky. ‘We must find some inlet as soon as possible. Any time now we may freeze in and be carried away off the coast in the middle of a floe.’

‘It’s very tempting to sail on and discover the extent of the coast,’ Dicky remarked, ‘but I suppose it’s too risky.’

Frazer nodded. ‘We’ll head for the first spot where the ship is likely to be safe for the winter.’

They were creeping up under the land against a light offshore breeze. When two hundred yards from the ice-cliffs, the anchor was let go, and for the first time for over four months the ship swung to her chain, connected once more with the solid

earth. But the connexion was short-lived. Scarcely had the light faded when a terrific gust of wind hit the ship, dragged the anchor and sent her scurrying away southwards. By the time the chain was hove in and the anchor secured, the coast had disappeared, and the boys, after less than an hour below, were struggling vainly to reset the canvas which they had stowed but a short time before. On the lower topsail yard, Dicky, Peter, and Tony tore at the frozen gaskets till their fingers bled, but failed to loosen the sail. With every minute of delay the ship was losing precious ground, being driven farther and farther from the security of the land. In vain the three laboured aloft, while from the deck Frazer shouted orders which they could not hear. Then without warning Peter collapsed and hung helpless over the yard. Dicky made his way along the frozen slippery foot-rope towards him and found that he had lost the power of his hands. With Tony's help he got the limp figure on to his back, transferred himself to a backstay, and descended hand over hand to the deck.

'Frostbite,' he shouted in Frazer's ear.

He carried his burden to the galley where, although the fire had gone out, the temperature was still slightly above freezing-point. Frazer was following him.

‘Aloft again and cut the gaskets adrift. Get the sail loosed at all costs.’

Dicky jumped into the rigging once more, keenly conscious of how ill-equipped they were for the Arctic winter. The wind blew through his improvised clothes; the woollen gloves which he wore had rubbed thin in the palm and were worse than useless as protection against this kind of weather; and his hands, he knew, would go like Peter’s in a very short time. He passed on the orders to Tony, and grasping a bare knife, made his way to the yardarm. A few slashing blows released the sail, but it remained up on the yard, too stiff to fall out of the folds. Reassuring himself that the clew and buntlines were clear, he called to Tony and descended to the deck. With Marchmont at the wheel, the three boys seized the purchases and tried to sheet home the topsail. It refused to move. In vain the boys hove down on the sheets, while icy spray flew across the decks and half-blinded them. For the first time since the ship had been blown off the Norwegian coast, Dicky felt that the elements might be too much for them, felt the numbing influence of the cold and realized how deadly it was. He redoubled his efforts, but the frozen ropes would not run through the blocks. At last they abandoned the attempt and managed

to set the mainstaysail instead. The vessel began to go ahead sluggishly, but still made two feet of leeway for every one on her course.

Danger suddenly appeared in the form of an iceberg which loomed up almost in their path. Tony saw it first and shouted to Frazer, whose heart sank at the sight. His first impulse was to tack ship, but a second's thought told him that even if the vessel had steerage way she would inevitably get into irons and drift down stern first on to the berg. The stern was the most vulnerable part of the hull and he could not risk such a collision. The ship must stand on close-hauled; there was a chance that she might clear the obstacle unscathed.

Frazer ran aft to the wheel and seized it, fearful lest Marchmont should try to steer away from the berg and spill the wind from the sails. Already she was heading a little too high, and reluctantly he let her fall off a point. She began to travel faster, but the bearing of the ice did not change; it was not more than thirty yards distant now, a low point sloping back steeply to the eighty-foot summit. Frazer was steering with absolute concentration, hoping against hope. The bowsprit came abreast of the ice and forged past it, the bows went clear and the berg was level with the house

amidships. Frazer held his breath while the ship literally scraped the ice. Five seconds more and she would be free. She shuddered suddenly and stopped with a crunching sound; the bows swung off the wind; then she began to go ahead again and a space grew between her and the berg. Frazer surrendered the wheel to Marchmont and, shouting to Dicky to keep a look-out ahead, dived below. Before he had reached the foot of the ladder his fears were confirmed: he could hear the gurgle of water streaming into the hull. He found the place and struck a match; the damage was local, one frame being fractured and the planking pierced. Faster than it could be pumped out, the water was pouring in. But, owing to the list of the ship when she struck, the hole was high up in her side.

Frazer leapt back on deck, his mind made up. He could not risk staying her, the delay might be fatal; he would wear her round, mainsail set and all. He cried to Marchmont to put the helm up, took Dicky and Tony aft, and eased away the mainsheet. The ship's head fell off slowly until she was running before the wind on an even keel. Marchmont steadied her there while, inch by inch, the three got the mainsheet home. Then the furious breeze struck the other side of the sail and the boom swung inboard, hit the top of the wheel-

house a smashing blow, lifted over it and, with a shock which shook the whole ship, took up the slack of the sheet.

‘Forgot the topping-lift,’ cried Frazer, ‘but it helped to check her.’

When the ship was close-hauled again he went below. The damage was now on the weather side and the cant of the vessel tended to lift it above the waterline, but the waves still threw solid jets of water through the hole, and when the wind eased and the hull righted a little the inflow was steady. Frazer picked up an old jersey and thrust it into the opening. To his astonishment it remained in position for a minute, reducing the leak to a fifth of its former size. He called Tony below, showed him what to do, then went back to the deck to get the pumps going.

Alone in the semi-darkness, Tony waged war with the icy stream. So long as the attack was intermittent he could cope with it, but when the pressure was steady, water flowed in on all sides, totalling to a frightful volume. Above, he could hear the incessant clank, clank of the pumps, and the thought of the straining arms and backs made him doubly alert in his task. His hands were half frozen, but his body perspired freely. The candle which Frazer had left him burned low,

guttered and gushed, sank to a tiny blue flame and went out. But now he knew where to apply himself, how to keep the main aperture filled, how to stuff the cloth between timber and plank. The sound of water moving to and fro beneath him was in his ears, and he listened eagerly to its sighs and gurgles, hoping to detect a lowering of the level.

At last a glimmer of light appeared in the doorway and he knew that dawn had come. At the same time the wind dropped, and by and by the pumps ceased. Now with the ship on an even keel the task became harder, and in the gloom water spurted at him in jets. What had happened on deck? A feeling of hopelessness came over him, but he stuck to his post. Were they preparing to abandon ship, getting the boat lowered? He listened in vain for any sounds which might give him an inkling. All he could decide was that the movements of the hull were becoming steadily more sluggish. And then, without warning, the pressure of water grew less, and the leak diminished to half its previous size. He heard footsteps on the ladder and Frazer's voice:

'Is that any better?'

Too astonished and exhausted to reply, he nodded in the direction of the gaping planks. Frazer

gave an exclamation of satisfaction, waited long enough to gauge the new extent of the leak, and fled away on deck. Five minutes later Tony was relieved by Marchmont. Desperately thirsty, he mounted the ladder expecting to get some water in the galley. The ship was covered with snow, the deck inches deep except for a black streak between the pumps and scuppers where the flow of water from the bilges had kept it clear. Dicky and Frazer were leaning over the damaged quarter adjusting a rope; the wheel was lashed and the brigantine was moving heavily with the wind abeam. Tony looked over the side and saw that a sail had been drawn round the hull under the keel, and stretched across the hole in the planking. He went forward to the galley and found Peter there, his hands chafed back into usefulness, endeavouring to start a fire. The water in the big kettle was frozen solid, and giving up all hope of a drink, he went back wearily to take a spell on the pumps.

The wind had changed and the ship was heading for a point on the coast further east than where she had anchored the night before. By midday she had come up to it and turned parallel to the land once more. The younger boys, utterly exhausted by lack of sleep, cold, and constant labour, would

willingly have beached her on the first promontory that came handy, but Frazer still hoped for some refuge where the hull might remain intact, or at least no more damaged than it was at present, during the winter. There was no time to waste. The boys could not in their enfeebled condition work the ship and keep the water under. Inch by inch, slowly but surely, the brigantine was sinking under their feet.

At two o'clock the trend of the coast altered to north-east and by and by land appeared on the starboard side. The ship was evidently entering a channel between two islands, or running into a deep indentation of the southern seaboard. Frazer went aloft to try to determine which, but could not. There was now a line of ice-cliff right ahead, but it seemed to be broken up, and an opening might lie behind half a dozen projections. He returned to the deck and lent a hand on the pumps; the vessel, with a good breeze aft and the big fore-sail set, was barely making three knots. Marchmont was done up and could only take short spells on the levers; Tony still struggled manfully but was obviously nearing the end of his tether; Peter leant over the wheel, heavy eyed and half-asleep, moving the spokes now and then with a great concentration of effort. Only Dicky retained a fraction

of his old vigour, his huge body bending up and down ceaselessly, the water streaming from his pump in a steady, endless stream.

A night in the boat would about finish them, Frazer reflected. Any beach he could find would have to do now. But there was no beach, nothing but line after line of vertical ice-cliffs, sheer and unscaleable. Again the hostility of the coast was borne in upon him, and struck something like despair to his heart. It was hard to lose the ship now, within a mile of solid ground, and with her, all hope of safety. Why had he not run her ashore hours ago in response to the half-veiled suggestion of the others? Even Dicky had seemed surprised at his determination to go on, although he had said nothing. Then at least he would have made sure of saving their lives. But looking ahead he had seen beyond the present need: seen the winter pass in hardship and hopelessness, the open water come again without a ship to sail it, seen the months grow into years.

He shook himself suddenly. He had been right. To be stranded on this desert coast without any means of leaving it would be worse than death. No ship had ever penetrated here before, none might ever come again. He became aware of Tony at his elbow and turned on him in fury that he

should waste his energy walking the length of the deck. But the words died on his lips. Tony was holding out his hands which had gone a deathly leaden shade.

‘Others too busy to do it,’ he said briefly.

Frazer began to chafe, noting the remains of gloves which hung about the wrists, and the finger pads flattened out and split so that the blood froze them together.

‘Got nothing to put on? Stockings, socks?’

‘The cabin’s flooded a foot deep,’ replied Tony. ‘My gear is all floating about.’

As he spoke a booming rumble broke out abreast of the ship. The boys turned and saw a quarter of a mile away a huge slab of ice, two hundred yards long and a hundred yards wide, break off from the coast and fall with a tremendous splash into the sea. When the spray had cleared, the new-born berg was afloat and lay rocking gently in its new element; presently a series of waves reached the ship, causing her to wallow with a deadly inertia.

Before she had quietened down again Frazer saw what he had hoped for, an apparent break in the solid wall towards which the ship was drifting, for she could scarcely be said to sail any longer. He shouted a word of encouragement to the others and went aloft. Presently the ship came up to the

narrow berg-strewn entrance and he had to decide. He could either turn to port into the fiord, or go on for perhaps another mile to where the coast doubled back on itself, and where the brigantine's voyage must inevitably come to an end. The fiord had a dark terrifying aspect, the coast ahead was open and exposed. He chose the former and gave the word to the steersman. The ship sagged wearily through the entrance between the bergs and emerged into an ice-locked basin. The light was fading, and inside the enclosing circle of ice-cliff threw an unearthly gloom over the sombre water. Frazer shuddered faintly. Somewhere ahead the brigantine would drift against a vertical face, and sink. There was no turning back now; full of water as she was she would never make an inch to windward. But no! In the furthestmost corner to the north-east a tiny beach was coming into view. It was not more than half a mile away; at her present speed fifteen minutes should cover the distance. He altered the course, dropped to the deck, and threw himself on a pump lever. Working like a maniac, he watched her crawl, foot by foot, across the basin, her progress impeded by young ice which grew harder and harder to penetrate. The deck amidships was almost flush with the water now, so that it seemed incredible that

the hull still floated. The beach came nearer and nearer, the ship sank lower and lower into the sea. And then, just as she was on the point of settling by the stern, her keel took bottom softly, and, listing over a little to starboard, she came to rest, ten yards from the shore.

Frazer left the pumps and staggered to the rail. The tiny scrap of beach at the bows seemed utterly lost and insignificant under the encircling walls of ice. But the ship was safe and might winter safely here.

CHAPTER XIII

ASHORE

THAT night, despite his fatigue, Frazer could not sleep. The desperate anxiety which he had felt for the last twenty-four hours was gone; the ship was for the time safe, and no immediate danger threatened. But an evil spirit of foreboding had seized him, and he lay tossing and turning wretchedly in his narrow bunk in the fo'c'sle, whither they had all removed to avoid the water aft. That the others were not faring much better was obvious from the sounds which came from their bunks. Marchmont groaned continually in his sleep, and every now and again Dicky broke out into inarticulate speech. When at last Tony started up with a yell that made Frazer's heart stand still, he could bear it no longer, and, slipping out fully dressed from the blankets, he mounted the vertical iron ladder and passed out of the hatchway to the deck.

It was a clear moonless night, and Frazer was astonished at the brilliance of the aurora which flitted to and fro in upright streamers over the northern sky. In deathly silence the weird dance went on, lighting up the snow and ice with a

strange, shadowless radiance. He stood quite still, listening intently. There was nothing to be heard, nothing but the faintest tick-ticking. It was the chronometers in the chart-room, keeping up their perpetual race with time. In thousands of ships, dozens of observatories, the same mechanisms were working, the hands pointing to the same hour and minute. The thought comforted him for a little, made him feel in touch with mankind. For the hundredth time he remembered the consultation which he had held with his father as to whether wireless should be fitted for this voyage; remembered how they had both, without much reason, decided against it.

He wandered aft and looked out over the half-frozen waters of the fiord. There was something uncanny about the place with its circular shape and vertical sides like a huge, frigid cauldron. How could such a place originate, how came the beach to be here when all the rest was cliff?

They must throw up a shelter of some kind precious quick, he thought, a shelter substantial enough to keep in the warmth and withstand the fierce winter blizzards which might begin at any time now. The strangeness of the whole adventure struck him with the vividness of a dream; the long struggle through the ice, the unknown seas, the

new land reached at last in the nick of time. Had human voices never before echoed along these shores, had no man ever planted foot on the ice-bound coast in all the centuries gone by? Impossible to say, but certainly none had ever come here and returned to the outer world again.

He glanced vaguely at the compass. The ship's head was pointing south apparently. It was queer. They had come in before a southerly breeze, he was certain, and beached stern to wind. What had happened? A look at the Pole Star told him that he was not mistaken. The ship was heading north-east all right. The compass was wrong.

He thumped the binnacle, but the card remained steady. Something that was almost panic crept over him. Such things happened, he knew, where deposits of magnetic minerals overcame the earth's magnetism. But in his highly-strung condition the explanation seemed unreal. The compass was a trusted friend and guide, and now it had suddenly become fickle and worthless. He went quickly along the deck and clambered into the fo'c'sle, thankful again for the company of his sleeping crew. In vain he argued with himself that his fears were imaginary, that he ought to sleep and refresh himself. But he could not surrender to unconsciousness now. A feeling of tension gripped him.

Every moment he expected something stupendous to happen. But nothing did. The hours passed silently, and at last, almost against his will, he slumbered.

When he awoke the fo'c'sle was empty and he started up guiltily. The morning was well advanced, but a thick layer of clouds hung like a lid over the fiord, shutting out the daylight. With the overcast sky had come a rise of temperature and the air seemed heavy and almost oppressive. Dicky was pacing the deck, and the other three leant over the bulwarks staring idly at the land.

'Thought you might as well have your sleep out,' said Dicky.

John nodded. 'The compass——' he began in sudden recollection, then stopped. Dicky waited.

'It was a bit off, last night.'

'Variation altered?'

'No. Clean round the other way.'

They went aft and looked. The lubber-line was on north-east by north. Frazer was silent.

'I must have dreamt it,' he said at length, knowing well that he had not. Dicky acquiesced absently.

'I feel a bit cheap to-day. Reaction, I suppose.'

They dropped the boat into the broken young

ice and pulled the few yards to the land. The rise and fall of the tide kept the fringes of the beach open, and it would be some time yet before there was a solid pathway from the hull to the shore. Tony was in the bows, but waited for Frazer when the keel grated on the frozen border.

‘You go first,’ he said. ‘It’s your discovery.’

The beach was only a hundred and fifty yards long by some fifty yards deep, hemmed in on all sides by tumbled masses of ice or vertical precipices. There was no outlet on the landward side, no means of gaining the vast snowfields beyond. The surface beneath the white coating seemed to be composed of small stones, with here and there an outcrop of bare rock.

‘Well, there’s not much of it, and it’s a pretty queer sort of spot, but it’s land,’ said Peter, kicking his heel into the snow.

‘Where are we going to build?’ asked Marchmont. ‘I suppose we *are* going to live ashore?’

Frazer nodded. ‘Yes. It’ll be warmer ashore than on the ship. And more comfortable too if the ice starts to cant her over. We’ll choose a site presently.’

‘The Eskimos use slabs of ice to build their huts with, don’t they?’ said Peter. ‘We could do that too, I suppose.’

'We'll have a job getting anything else,' Tony replied. He had come on a sizeable stone and was tugging with might and main to detach it from the surface. It would not yield. Frazer was rooting about in the snow and soon found what he wanted: a projecting ledge offered something to which a rope might be made fast.

'We'll rig a purchase on this and drag the anchor ashore, before we do anything else.'

They wandered round the confines of the beach for a time, then set to work painfully, their stiffened muscles hampering them at every turn. Somehow a hole was made in the adamant surface and the fluke of the anchor buried in it; when that was done a few buckets of melted ice were brought from the galley and poured over the loose rubble. In fifteen minutes the anchor was frozen immovably to the ground. But Frazer was not yet satisfied. Two heavy baulks of timber were fixed upright by the same device and hawsers run ashore from the ship's bows. He did not fear that the hull would move in its present water-logged condition, but when it floated again, a gale such as they had encountered two nights before would try their gear to its limit. Once the sea around was firmly frozen the danger would disappear, unless, indeed, the ice began to shift out from the

beach, when no quantity of cables could hold the ship in place.

By the time they had finished it was four o'clock, and the short October day was drawing to a close. The tide, which appeared to have a range of five or six feet, was not suitable for examining the stoved-in planking, and the boys were glad enough in their still exhausted condition to return to the fo'c'sle. Before going below, however, Frazer and Dicky took a hand-lead and sounded round the ship. Somewhat to Frazer's dismay he found that the vessel, instead of lying on a smooth shelving beach as he had thought, was sitting on the side of a steep bank which fell from two fathoms to over fifteen in a distance of twenty yards.

'We must get her patched up and hauled nearer the shore without delay,' he remarked to Dicky. 'If she began to slide we might lose her still.'

Dicky agreed. 'I wondered why she took such a list this morning when you were asleep. It must have been the angle of the bottom.'

Frazer was silent for a time. The light had almost gone and the sides of the fiord seemed to have crept closer together, overhanging the dark surface of the sea.

'What do you think of the place?' he said at length.

'It's a bit depressing after the open,' Dicky replied, 'but we'll most likely get used to that.' He hesitated. 'It doesn't seem a very likely spot for hunting, somehow. Can't imagine bears frequenting it, for instance.'

'No, they prefer the open, I imagine. We'll have to go out after them as soon as the ice is safe. Anything oily is going to be invaluable to us.'

'It's going to be a pretty tight fit, I take it.'

'Yes. We can't afford to lose a scrap of anything we kill now. Thank heavens we've got plenty of coal, even although it is under water at the moment.'

They pushed their way back to the ship and climbed on to the deck. Below, the fo'c'sle was dismal and cheerless; the upper half of the stove-pipe had been lost or swept overboard, and the fire would not draw. The boys lay in their bunks with the blankets up to their chins, talking desultorily. The long evening dragged away, and after a meal of short rations, they one by one turned over and prepared for sleep. Suddenly Tony cried,

'By Jove! I've got the idea.'

No one answered, and he went on:

'I say, you chaps, listen to this.'

Peter grunted that he would rather sleep, but Dicky was more encouraging.

‘Well, cough it up.’

Tony raised himself on one elbow and looked round. Under the smoky rays of the lamp the others were mere inanimate mounds of blankets.

‘I’ve been thinking about the hut we’re going to build ashore and how we’re going to keep warm in it,’ he began, ‘and I don’t see how it’s to be done.’

‘Why not?’ Dicky grunted.

‘There aren’t enough loose stones to be any use, and even if we did raise a stone house, it would be exposed to all the winds that blow.’

‘Well, wouldn’t anything we could make?’

‘No, it wouldn’t,’ replied Tony decisively. ‘From the stones, I thought of blocks of ice and the job it would be hewing them. Not the labour so much as the skill required. And then I got my idea.’

He paused.

‘What is it?’ asked Dicky at last.

‘Why, don’t you see it? Instead of building a house we want to carve one out of the solid ice. We could cut a small entrance tunnel, then when we were in far enough, widen out into a living room. And have a store-room beyond that again.

We'd be right away from the wind and snow, and what's more, once we got started we'd be working in shelter all the time.'

There was silence in the fo'c'sle. Then Peter turned round and exposed his head.

'It's a wheeze and no mistake. But won't the temperature be very low in the middle of the glacier?'

'I don't think so. We'd have the stove inside, of course.'

'It's a great notion,' said Dicky. 'What do you think of it, Frazer?'

'Splendid. If it's possible to cut into the ice, that's to say. Apart from that, I see no reason why we shouldn't be perfectly snug. By Jove! nobody ever thought of living in the heart of a glacier before.'

They were all wide awake now, and for the first time had shaken off the strange depression that had dogged them ever since entering the fiord.

'I say, let's go and try it right away,' suggested Peter. 'It's not late yet.'

'Yes, let's,' begged Tony. 'I shan't sleep until I know if it's feasible.'

Frazer was not hard to persuade. In ten minutes they were trooping across the beach armed with axes and lanterns. At the north end of the shore

and running at right angles to it was a smooth perpendicular face of ice. Peter was lifting his axe to deal a blow when Frazer stopped him.

‘Hold hard,’ he said, ‘this is a bit of a ceremony. We’ll choose a spot first and let Tony have first knock.’

They prowled about in the gloomy night, their lanterns casting odd reflections on the ice-face.

‘We’ll want the entrance a bit off the ground,’ said Marchmont, ‘to allow for a heavy snowfall.’

They decided at last, and Tony, swinging the axe round his head lustily, brought it down on the glassy surface. The ice shivered and flew away in splinters, leaving a cavity three or four inches deep. Before he had tired the hole had sunk a foot.

‘Enough,’ cried Frazer. ‘We can do it all right. As soon as the ship’s attended to, we’ll start in earnest.’

They went back on board, full of excitement. Before at last they settled down, Peter had elaborated a scheme for cutting a tunnel with steps through to the upper surface of the ice-cap. Just as he was on the point of sleep Frazer remembered that he had not looked at the compass that night, but the vague disquiet which returned to him soon wore off, and he sank into an easy repose.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOUSE IN THE GLACIER

NEXT morning Peter and Tony were enthusiastic to start cutting out the habitation in the ice, but Frazer, who still, after a night's sleep, considered the plan feasible and admitted its urgency, required their services on the ship. At low water a temporary patch was put on her side, the water was pumped out of her, and as the tide returned she was hauled foot by foot towards the beach. When it came to the more highly skilled labour of replacing the injured timber, however, the younger boys found themselves free to work ashore while Frazer and Dicky plied adze and chisel in the hold.

Tony's original scheme of a low entrance tunnel was adhered to, and soon an opening began to appear a few feet from the ground. The novelty of the idea, and the desire to see how it would answer, lent power to their arms, and the excavation progressed steadily, if somewhat less rapidly than they had expected. The narrowness of the entrance made movements very restricted, and as soon as they had penetrated a little way from the surface, axes had to be discarded for short-handled

hatchets, and vigorous swinging for cramped, exasperating pecks. They were strongly tempted to enlarge the tunnel in order to make the work easier, but the thought of the enhanced snugness of the living chamber kept them to their purpose.

The three boys laboured in short intensive shifts, one hewing, one clearing away the debris, the third resting. Fortunately the weather remained fairly mild, the thermometer registering between fifteen and twenty degrees of frost, so that to sit outside the tunnel for a five minutes' spell was not unpleasant. But the period of low temperature which they had been through before the ship reached the fiord was not forgotten, and once again needles were plied by the boys in the evening, to more purpose now that experience had shown them their errors.

By the afternoon of the third day the entrance was complete, and the onslaught on the main chamber begun. The initial stages were trying, for it was necessary for the hewer to lie flat on his back and work above his head, dislodging fragments which as likely as not fell on his face. But as the cavity grew, attitudes became less painful, until at last Peter, who was the shortest, could stand upright and slash away between his knees. In the

meantime Frazer and Dicky had finished their work as shipwrights and were busy transferring stores from the hold to the shore. To aid them, they had fixed a wire rope from the foretop across the intervening space; on this a kind of bosun's chair was rigged so that, once in position, cases and casks could be run ashore with ease. Already a pile of some dimensions lay under a tarpaulin near the excavation, and a short time would see all the edible stores transported. It was the speed with which the job was being done that disconcerted Frazer; inroads made on the provisions since last he had examined them were considerable, and the amount of foodstuffs to be removed seemed painfully small. The last of the bear-fat had been eaten, and for the time the diet contained no fresh food of any kind, a circumstance which, if allowed to continue, must lead to ill-health and perhaps scurvy. But bird-life had vanished before the approach of winter, and the fiord, although covered now by ice, was still unsafe for hunting expeditions to the outer shores. They could only wait until conditions were more favourable, and by that time, Frazer reflected, bears would probably have taken to their hibernating quarters and be difficult to find.

The days began to grow colder again, and no

effort was spared to get the cavern ready for occupation. Dicky and Frazer took their turns, often working far into the night in the dimly-lit chamber. The boat was dragged ashore and turned upside down on the beach to form a store for articles too large to take into the cave; the sails were unbent from the brigantine's yards, and the running-gear unrove and coiled away below. All was in readiness for deserting the ship.

At last, on the second day of November, Tony chipped the one remaining unevenness from the floor and pronounced the cavern finished. It was noon and the sun was just grazing the southern horizon; in another fortnight it would be gone, not to become visible again until February. The living-room, some twelve feet in diameter by seven feet high, was dome-shaped, and at the back of it a narrow passage led to a low store-room presently to be filled with food, weapons, ammunition, ropes, canvas, and all the gear necessary for the long night to come. The stove was installed in the middle of the main floor, the stove-pipe leading out above the entrance, and wooden gratings had been constructed to raise the sleepers off the ice.

All the afternoon the boys laboured in bitter cold under a leaden sky, and it was obvious that a change of weather was imminent. Coming in

finally after a trip to the ship, Tony declared that the heat was tropical. Marchmont had started the stove and heaped it up so that it was almost red-hot, but the icy walls of the new dwelling showed little sign of it and remained practically dry. That night they held a house-warming feast and ate with relish in the novel surroundings; when the meal was almost finished and they were drinking coffee, Peter apologetically produced a comb of honey.

‘Bought it in Southampton,’ he said, ‘and didn’t feel like it after I was seasick.’

He divided it into five and passed it round. The boys ate it with solemn enjoyment, savouring the unfamiliar taste.

‘Good old Peter,’ said Tony. ‘Where on earth did you have it stowed?’

‘In my bunk,’ replied Peter. ‘Some of it ran through and got into your hair. You thought it was resin out of the planks, you remember.’

Tony nodded. ‘Have you got any more?’

The other shook his head. A silence fell upon the little party, while outside in the darkness the rising wind moaned weirdly about the tunnel entrance. Presently a few flakes of snow drifted in, and Dicky got up and unrolled a heavy tarpaulin flap over the doorway. There were no chairs, and

the boys lay sprawling about the stove in their sleeping bags; the light from the fire flickered oddly on the icy walls and cast queer distorted shadows of the recumbent figures. Stretched on his back, Marchmont was looking upwards.

'I can't help thinking what would happen if the roof fell in,' he said at length in a low tone. As he spoke there was a sudden howl of wind in the chimney and little tongues of flame darted out from the stove. Then something crashed against the stovepipe outside, and the cavern began to fill with smoke. The boys jumped to their feet.

'Sounds like some one stuck in the chimney,' said Peter, a trifle shakily.

Frazer and Dicky put on gloves and helmets and picked up their rifles, then lifted the flap and crawled away into the blackness.

'It's all right,' Dicky shouted. 'It's only an overhanging snow cornice come down on the pipe. But, by Jove, isn't it a night!'

He and Frazer crouched at the mouth of the tunnel looking towards the ship. They could hear the sound of the storm in the rigging, every note of it familiar to their ears, but at a distance of fifty yards she was completely lost to view in the night blizzard.

'Wonder if she's all right,' shouted Frazer.

'What could we do for her anyhow?' Dicky yelled back.

'Let's go and see if the mooring ropes are taking the strain.'

They jumped on to the deep snow and struggled across the beach. The air was dense with clouds of ice-particles which swept over them and almost choked them. They reached a rope and found it loose, then the anchor chain, then another rope.

'The ice is holding her so far,' Dicky bel-
lowed.

Somewhere on board a door was banging inter-
mittently.

'We'll go and stop that row,' shouted Frazer.

He advanced three steps and was out of sight. The wind launched itself over the cliffs in great rushes, which seemed to fill up the enclosure of the beach, then drain it empty. Dicky had lost his sense of direction and stumbled blindly about until by accident he found the anchor. He paused for breath, then followed the chain down the beach to the ship's bows and felt his way along the hull. Frazer was waiting by the ladder and they climbed on board. It was the door of the lamp-locker that had come adrift, and securing it,

Frazer dived into the wheelhouse for a moment's shelter.

'Shouldn't care to be ten miles to the south'ard to-night,' he gasped.

He struck a match and peered into the binnacle.

'Look at that!'

As before, the compass card lay reversed. The flame died away and the glowing matchhead broke off and fell on the floor. Frazer stamped it out.

'There's something mighty uncanny about it,' said Dicky.

'Yes, there is. But don't say anything to the others to-night.'

They left the ship and reached the land; a dim ruddy glow led them back to the cavern. Inside, Marchmont had made up the fire afresh and brewed another pot of coffee. Frazer let down the flap with an air of finality, and drew off his leather seaboots.

'There's no fear of the slates coming off anyhow,' said Peter as another gust went past.

They lingered late over the coffee, too unsettled by the storm to feel their fatigue. It was after midnight when at last they found comfortable places round the stove and stretched themselves out to sleep. Frazer remained wide awake, and

lay for a long time looking at the glowing coals and wondering how it would all end—what the winter would bring and the summer after it, what the chances were of reaching civilization, whether the present strange abode was the best protection they could obtain against the bitter months to come. Once he got up and went to the entrance, but the night was as black as ever and there was nothing to be seen. He wrapped himself anew in his bag and fell asleep.

He awoke with every muscle tense and drawn, and possessed by an overpowering sense of terror. Fear-stricken, he lay motionless and unable to think. At last his brain cleared a little. What dreadful thing had happened? He relaxed slowly but kept on the alert, he knew not for what. Were the others awake? He could not bring himself to speak.

Presently Marchmont cleared his throat drily.

‘Are you awake?’ said Frazer in a low whisper.

He was, as were all the others. They had come to consciousness more or less as he had done himself, fearfully and with the sensation of something having happened. They talked with hushed voices, pausing spasmodically to listen. The wind had dropped and the night was quite still. The sudden falling-in of the half-burned coals in the stove

startled them all. Frazer crawled out of his bag and lighted a lantern. Everything in the cavern was as it had been. He bent down and passed into the store-room. Nothing had happened there.

'We've all got a bad fit of the jumps,' he said when he returned. 'We'll keep hourly watches till morning. I'll take the first one.'

He had brought a rifle from the inner chamber, and leaning it against the ice beside him, he squatted down. When the hour was over he called Peter and found that he had not been asleep.

At breakfast they were still under the influence of the night's happenings, and Frazer was not surprised when Peter said,

'Let's go back and live on the ship, cold or not. This place is haunted.'

No one replied. The homely air of the brigantine's cabin would be very welcome, Frazer thought, but it would be silly to leave their new quarters without better reason than a joint nightmare, however vivid. He said nothing, trusting to the effect of daylight to restore their nerves. It was Tony who crawled out first and reported that they were snowed up. He had to come back for a shovel before he cleared a way to the open and could

see the chill Arctic dawn. Save for a small outcrop of rock which a freak of the wind had left bare, there was no dark object to break the monotony of the snow. The ship lay white-coated in every detail, the starboard bulwarks flush with a heavy drift which rose in a long curve from the ice.

'The fresh fall should give us a chance to see if there are bears about,' said Frazer to Dicky. 'I think we'll risk the ice and try to get out to the coast.'

At eleven o'clock he set off with Peter, each carrying a rifle slung over the shoulder. Frazer led the way, advancing carefully over the deep snow, testing every step with a long bamboo pole. When they had gone two hundred yards over the young ice they came to a line of grey running across their path where the snow was wetted by water. Frazer plunged his pole into it, and it pierced easily through the soft slush to the sea beneath. They turned to the left and skirted the treacherous surface until they reached the ice-cliff at the edge of the fiord. There the ice looked broken up and dangerous and they retraced their steps. Soon it was obvious that there was no way round the lane, and going to the ship, they brought back a twelve-foot plank. Frazer slid it out across

the weak ice and got on to it. When he reached the middle Peter saw the wood sag, but he crossed without mishap. Peter followed and they drew the plank after them.

In half an hour they could see out of the fiord between the sentinel bergs aground on either side of the entrance. Away beyond the sky looked black, and Frazer knew that there was open water some distance off the coast. They edged in to the left and followed round the curve of the cliffs till they reached the iceberg region. In the midst of these they lost sight of everything, and wandered for a time among blue ice-faces powdered here and there with snow. At last they landed on the base of a tall berg and began to climb it.

When Frazer reached the top he was facing back into the fiord; he turned round slowly to spy out a path which would lead them to the outer coast. Not a quarter of a mile away the ice ended abruptly and the open sea began, the dark water brushing the cliffs on either hand. As he looked, Frazer could see, what he had missed before, that a strong current scoured across the mouth of the fiord. No escape lay that way: they were prisoners in the fiord, and might be so till Christmas.

They returned to the ship without any trace of

game, and hardly expecting to see any in this inaccessible region. There was no means to their knowledge by which bears could enter the fiord from the landward side, and swimming was the only method that would bring them in from seaward. Frazer was anxious. Already they all had a craving for more fat, and at their present rate of consumption their source of fat, the tinned beef and salt junk, would not last for another month. If they could not find bears their plight would be a desperate one.

'We've either got to drag the boat over the ice and go hunting in her,' he said that night at supper, 'or else get up on top and cross to a likelier bit of coast.'

'The boat would be pretty ghastly in a blizzard,' Dicky remarked.

'So would the snowfields,' Marchmont put in.

'Still, we wouldn't be blown off them out to sea,' said Tony.

'No, I'm afraid it's too risky,' Frazer agreed slowly. 'I think we had better adopt Peter's plan and cut a stairway up to the top.'

'From here, do you mean?' asked Tony.

'Yes, from the store-room. It shouldn't take us more than a week. The others could be making a tent in the meanwhile.'

They discussed the project for a time, then grew silent. Something of the previous night's terror was still upon them, and they were loath to sleep. But they did not speak of the unaccountable fear which they felt, and presently an uneasy drowsiness claimed them.

CHAPTER XV

THE CREVASSE

WHEN, at the completion of the new upward tunnel, Dicky thrust his head and shoulders out of the narrow opening, a half moon was setting red in the west. On three sides the snow stretched smoothly away in long slopes, luminous and unreal under the starlight. He drew himself out on to the snow and felt it granular under foot, then walked a few yards to the top of the cliff and looked down on the frozen fiord and ice-bound ship. But he was too lightly clad to linger, and reflecting that a cover of some kind would be required to keep the drifts out of the tunnel, he returned through the ice and crawled down the hundred odd steps to the store-room.

Three days later the boys set out on a hunting expedition to the eastward. Frazer at first had proposed splitting up the party, but so strong had been the opposition of those who were to be left behind in the cavern that he gave up the scheme and took them all. It was quite dark when they started, but an hour or two's twilight would help them at midday, and the moon would rise in the early afternoon. The sledge was laden with a tent, blankets, cooking utensils, an improvised paraffin

stove, and food for four days. Frazer hoped that one night in the open would suffice, but the country was unknown and bears might be scarce.

All morning they toiled up a long incline, three pulling in traces, two going ahead on skis to pick the way. The surface was uneven and the sledge was hard to keep moving; by midday Frazer saw that their progress was not half so rapid as he had expected. Ahead was a high ridge; from what he had seen of the coast from the ship he thought that once this ridge was gained they could run down into a flatter and more open district. But hour after hour passed and the ridge seemed as far off as ever. At two o'clock they stopped to eat and rest; the glow had disappeared from the southern horizon, and the darkness on top of their fatigue made them silent and moody. Frazer knew that there was no hope of reaching low ground that day, and waited for the moon before pushing onwards.

Towards seven o'clock the snow flattened out, and it was obvious that the highest point was reached. But the boys were exhausted, and when the sledge stopped, had hardly strength between the five of them to get it going again.

Frazer called a halt at last and went off by himself to decide where they should camp; completely

done up by the long pull, the others dropped on the snow for a respite. Feeling his shoulders ache, Tony slipped out of the strap and stretched himself; Peter, still in his harness, was sitting facing the sledge and the far distant fiord. He could hear Dicky saying something to Marchmont, but he was too tired to listen.

A curious drowsiness was upon him, the effect of exhaustion and the cold; if he did not rouse himself, he thought, he would go to sleep where he sat.

His eyelids dropped and lifted again, his vision directed on the bulky sledge. The murmur of voices became fainter, then ceased. The sledge appeared to shrink strangely. This must be a curious dream. Lower and lower it sank, then in a twinkling it vanished from sight. Peter sat up suddenly with a shout. At the same instant something plucked him round the chest and he was drawn slithering over the snow. A black gulf yawned at his feet. He shouted again and tried to throw himself backwards, but the irresistible drag pulled him over and he fell down, down, interminably. At last he struck what he recognized to be the tarpaulin of the sledge; he rolled off it and knew no more.

Lying on his back, Tony had been alarmed by

the chest-strap slipping from under him. He was in time to see Peter's figure in violent motion and to hear his second shout. For an instant he was too astounded to move; then he got to his feet and saw the chasm which had opened up and swallowed his shipmate. He raised the alarm, and crawled to the edge on his hands and knees. Frazer came running towards him.

'Where's the sledge?' he shouted.

'Down there,' said Tony pointing. 'And Peter with it.'

They knelt in horror over the crevasse and peered downwards. Dicky shouted again and again but there was no reply. He took a handful of snow, made a snowball and let it fall into the gaping void. They listened with bated breath. No sound followed its flight.

'It's bottomless,' he gasped.

Frazer stood up. 'We must have left the sledge right above the crack. Peter was in the traces, you say, and was dragged with it?'

Tony nodded.

'The rope is with the sledge,' Frazer went on. 'We've got to make the ship. Tony, you are the fastest on skis. You know where to find a rope. Come right back with it. I'll follow you.'

Before he had finished speaking, Tony was strap-

ping on a pair of skis hastily flung off by Marchmont, and without a word he glided away over the snow and was lost to view.

‘Couldn’t I go instead of you?’ said Marchmont. Frazer considered for a second.

‘Yes. You’re better than I am. Get two blankets and a bottle of brandy. Dicky, give him your skis.’

Flying over the frozen snow on the long downward slope, Tony was concentrating all his faculties on gauging the direction of the ship. In the great stretch there was no landmark to assist him, and he lost the sledge tracks in a few minutes. The distance to the ship was six or seven miles; at his present speed he reckoned that three-quarters of an hour should see him in the vicinity of the fiord. But he was tired, and the fourteen miles must be covered on his reserves of strength. With the cold air stinging his cheeks, he settled down to the long run; under him the skis met the snow with a steady swish, swish, throwing up fountains of spray on either hand. Once he found himself in rough going and floundered heavily for a time, then gained the smooth again, and sped towards the sea.

The moon was high and lent a ghostly luminosity to the snow; he had the sensation of moving over a plain which grew up in front of him, its

limits always the same distance ahead, receding as he advanced. Presently he began to mark vague objects which must, when he reached them, he thought, bring some assurance of progress, but the moonlit vistas opened endlessly before him.

He seemed now to have been travelling for hours, and he began to wonder if he was moving in a circle. But the incline was distinct and reassured him.

Suddenly it became steeper and he could see the pack-ice in front of him. He drew up abruptly five yards from the edge of a precipice, and looked to left and right. The coast was strange and unfamiliar. He turned to the left, ran for five minutes, then stopped, his progress barred by a mass of tumbled ice. In desperation he retraced his way and went on doggedly along the top of the ice-cliffs. It was only chance now if he found the ship, but chance was on his side.

From a low ridge he saw, half a mile ahead, the sentinel bergs of the fiord, and with a lightening of his heart, he altered his direction and made for the beach. Arrived above it, he decided not to waste time going down the tunnelled steps, and throwing off his skis, he leapt over the cliff. It was a fifty foot drop, but there was deep, soft snow at the foot, or had been yesterday. In mid-air,

struggling to keep an upright position, he thought, 'What if the snow has hardened now?' but he landed gently and without damage. He picked himself out of the drift and ran down the beach, then stopped in sudden fright. A bulky figure was moving on the decks of the brigantine. A moment later he recognized Marchmont with a bundle on his shoulders. They only paused for a few words, each bent on his own errand. Tony had a constant vision of Peter lying crushed and senseless in a fantastic attitude, and the minutes which he had lost through the mistake in direction goaded him to furious energy.

They started back together by way of the cavern and hewn stairway. Inside, it was pitch black, and as he passed through, Tony once more experienced the nameless terror which came upon him at odd moments of waking. Heavily laden and with the slope against them, they faced the long return journey. Tony began to draw ahead, his teeth clenched for the supreme effort. He heard Marchmont shout to him to go on; after that he was alone.

In the bitter night he grew hot beneath his clothing, but his breath, caught in quick gasps, seemed to freeze in his lungs. The heavy manilla rope in a coil about his neck pressed on his

shoulders like a burden of lead, rasping into the skin at every movement. After a time he became almost insensible and moved automatically, conscious only of the blood surging through his forehead. He stumbled and fell, and for more than a minute lay crushed under the rope. When he rose his mind was clearer, and he scanned the gaunt slopes for some indication of his progress. Far away on the right he thought he saw a light twinkle for a moment. 'I must have imagined it,' he said to himself and set his teeth once more.

But obstacles rose in the way which he had not encountered on the downward journey, and he found that he was moving among snow-covered rocks. He had come too far inland, he decided, and swung to the right. From time to time in a labyrinth of boulders the temptation to rest almost overpowered him, but he knew well that if he did so, he would sleep at once and probably never waken. At last he won clear of the obstructions and again had the sensation of a tiny light far ahead. He toiled towards it at a snail's pace, in an extremity of exhaustion, his wiry body taxed beyond its capacity. Queer delusions obsessed him. Spring had come again, but the sun had failed to appear, and now it would always be dark or

moonlight. For a time he forgot Peter and thought that he was fleeing from the horror of the cavern, whose upper entrance yawned always at his heels ready to engulf him should he pause. His moments of lucidity became fewer and fewer.

The twinkle of light had long since disappeared, and he was moving blindly forward again when he heard a shout. He stopped and tried to find breath for an answer. His voice was unrecognizable to himself. Then Frazer came to his side and lifted the rope off his shoulders.

‘What time is it?’ he asked. ‘How long away?’

‘Midnight. You’ve been five hours.’

Frazer and Dicky had thrown up a low shelter of snow, and with their jack-knives had cut out deep footholds near the crevasse. Tony dropped behind the shelter.

‘You want me to go down?’ he said turning on his elbow.

‘Yes, but rest while we make ready.’

He was asleep at once. Instantly some one was tugging at his arm and he was listening to far-off voices.

‘It’s no go. I’ll undertake it if you’re willing to stand the risk.’

He drifted away again. When he awoke he heard Dicky say:

'The kid's played out, I tell you. Leave him to sleep. I could heave you up, easily.'

Suddenly he remembered and realized what was afoot. He rolled over and sat upright.

'I'm game,' he said.

Frazer came towards him with the end of the rope and fastened it securely under his arms, padding it heavily with a woollen muffler.

'Take this candle-end tied to your wrist, and the matches. Shout once for stop, twice for down, three times for up.'

Tony staggered to the edge and sat down with his legs over the gulf. Frazer and Dicky lay back on the ice with feet well embedded and took the strain.

'Good luck,' said Dicky.

Tony slid over and felt the rope come tight about his chest. He had to push off with his hands to prevent his head striking the ice. A yard lower the wall became concave and he swung to and fro like a pendulum, touching nothing. The rope ran with little jerks, and Tony could picture Frazer and Dicky easing away, a handhold at a time. Twenty, thirty, fifty feet he must be down now and still he touched nothing. It occurred to him that the ice might be a quarter of a mile thick and cracked from top to bottom. He shuddered and

put out his hands in the darkness. Looking up he saw a solitary star, but could not judge his distance from the surface. His pendulum-like swing became greater and greater, and he feared that he might be dashed against an obstruction which he could not see. He shouted once and waited. The downward movement stopped, and he swung back and forward in absolute stillness. Then the thought of the straining arms and backs flashed through his mind, and he gave two shouts in quick succession.

Half a minute later his knee struck something and he scrambled in vain for a footing. The ice-wall sloped steeply to one side, so that, descending, he was carried out of the vertical. He slid down the smooth face, then looked up. The star had gone and he realized that he was in a slanting fissure. In sudden alarm he made the signal to stop, but it was not obeyed. He shouted again, and was relieved when he became stationary, and hung in the rope, one side pressed against the ice. Something soft brushed his face and he recoiled in terror. When he had recovered a little he felt for the matches. Again the light touch descended on his shoulder and, panic-stricken, he almost screamed aloud.

At last he struck a match and held it out. A

loose end of rope was swinging about his head, and looking upwards, he saw that it depended from the sledge, which was jammed vertically in the narrowing crack. The end of rope was frayed out and stranded, he noticed, and knew that it was Peter's trace. He looked down apprehensively. In the dim light he saw a shapeless, huddled form stuck where the sides of the fissure ran close together. A minute afterwards he reached it and found that Peter was alive. Beyond that he could determine nothing.

The fissure opened again below, and Tony was fearful lest he should dislodge the other; he had to straddle across the gulf while he removed the rope and passed it round Peter's body. Once his foot slipped, and it was only by throwing his weight on to the rope that he saved himself from falling. At last all was ready and he shouted. The rope tautened and Peter began to lift. Then Tony was left balanced precariously in the guttering candle-light, hardly daring to breath, knowing well that another slip would send him to destruction.

CHAPTER XVI

WINTER CLOSING IN

THE noose reappeared at last. When he got to the top he found that Marchmont had arrived; deathly pale, Peter was lying on a blanket with blood on his neck from a scalp wound.

‘Right arm’s broken,’ said Frazer. ‘Nothing else that I can find. Take a leg and chafe.’

The four boys knelt on the snow and worked tirelessly at the stiff limbs. The hands, protected only by two pairs of woollen gloves, looked dead and inert, and an hour passed before Dicky reported a returning glow. The broken bone made the saving of the right hand doubly difficult, and it was long ere Frazer was satisfied that the circulation had started. He set the arm as well as he could and bound it between parts of a broken ski-stick. When he had finished he straightened his back and looked at his watch.

‘Half past two. We can’t start for the cavern until we’ve rested.’

‘I brought this with me,’ said Marchmont.

He took from his pocket a rectangular tin containing two pounds of chocolate; it was the last in

their possession, and Frazer had been hoarding it as an emergency ration. The slabs were hard and brittle with the cold and could only be eaten with great difficulty.

'I've got it,' said Frazer. 'Tony, come and lie between Peter and the shelter. Marchmont on the other side. That's the best we can do for him. We're going to cover you all up with snow.'

Marchmont protested that he was not tired, but Frazer repeated his command, and the two boys lay down one on either side of the motionless figure. Dicky spread a blanket over them, and heaped up the snow on top of it, until Marchmont complained of the weight.

'We'll be suffocated,' said Tony in a muffled voice.

'Nonsense. Is it warm?'

'Quite,' replied Tony and became silent.

Frazer and Dicky moved away a few yards and began pacing up and down. The temperature was far below zero, but the wind had fallen to a calm, and the cold was not apparent at first. The moon, low in the west, passed slowly to her setting; upright and alert, Orion was high in the heavens and dominated the southern sky. The stillness was perfect, and to the ears of the listeners had the

quality of positive existence rather than of negation. On all sides the vague whiteness of the snow merged indistinguishably into a pale moonlit haze, which dissolved in turn into the luminous sky.

Every hour Frazer thrust his hand into the snow and felt Peter's forehead. At five o'clock he noticed a difference, and woke the sleepers. Tony was stiff with cold and Marchmont in hardly better plight; it was some time before they could use their limbs sufficiently to assist in chafing. Tony lay down again dreading the hours to come, and only keeping his position for the sake of the warmth which his body imparted to Peter. The others resumed their weary vigil; it was the hour of lowest vitality, and a deadly sluggishness was upon them. The cold penetrated their clothing and drugged their senses, bringing an all-powerful desire for rest. At half past seven Frazer roused himself with an effort.

'Can't send Tony down there again. I'll go myself this time and fetch up some food. If we don't do something soon I'll be asleep.'

'Same here. Shall I waken them?'

He dug into the snow and spoke. Tony was lying awake and responded at once; Marchmont had fallen into a deep slumber. They made Peter

as comfortable as possible while John prepared to go down, but it was some time before the boys could trust their numbed muscles to bear his weight. Five minutes after he slipped into the chasm he gave the signal for return, and the boys began to pull. Frazer's greater bulk and the articles which he was carrying strained them to the limit, and there was a gasp of relief when his head appeared at the surface. He threw off the sledge-tarpaulin and extra blankets, then produced the oil stove and some food.

'The tent and most of the tinned stuff fell out,' he said. 'I could hear it going down for hundreds of feet. It may be falling still.'

'Any hope of getting the sledge up?'

'Fraid not. It's jammed tight.'

With the tarpaulin they rigged a low roof over Peter and crawled inside. The improvised stove gushed out smoke and black smuts, but rather than lose the precious warmth they endured to the verge of suffocation. At last enough snow was melted to supply a drink of water all round. Their thirst relieved, they ate ravenously while the panful of snow melted a second time. Peter blinked his eyes suddenly and looked around. He lifted his head, then dropped it back quickly with a groan.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked feebly. ‘The sledge, what happened to it?’

Frazer told him briefly the history of the night.

‘Yes, I seem to remember wondering why I was lying with my feet so high. That must have been in the fissure.’

He lost consciousness for a time. When he came to again they gave him hot coffee, and Frazer re-examined the broken forearm by the dim light of the stove.

‘Any ordinary person would have been killed,’ he said.

‘I hit the sledge. That must have saved me.’

Crouched under the canvas in the smoky fumes, they finished the rough meal and waited silently, loath to leave the snugness of the shelter. But it was only three hours till the midday twilight would appear, and presently they roused themselves. Tony made another descent and brought up the more valuable articles remaining, including fifty rounds of ammunition; the skis were lashed together to form a kind of sledge, and Peter was laid on it and secured in position. The party moved off slowly in the darkness, Frazer going ahead to look out for more crevasses.

In the late afternoon they reached the fiord.

Peter had grinned cheerfully through most of the journey, but the pain of the steady jolting had exhausted him, and as they lowered him down the steps he fainted. The cavern was as they had left it, but that night it cast its gloom more deeply over them than ever before. At last Tony spoke of it.

'I felt better up there this morning,' he said with a jerk of his thumb, 'than I've done since we beached the ship. There's something sinister about this place, fiord and all.'

Dicky nodded moodily. 'Sinister—yes, that's it.'

In vain Frazer tried to lead the conversation to other lines. How had they come to leave the sledge exactly over a crevasse, he asked? But the others were too absorbed to speculate, and he went on to explain his own theory to a silent audience.

'One thing is certain,' said Marchmont unexpectedly. 'We all feel there's something queer about the place, and that wouldn't happen if there was no reason for it, you may be sure.'

'Why, what reason could there be?' said Tony in a lowered voice.

Marchmont made no reply.

'Do you mean something—something supernatural?'

'I mean simply, cause and effect.'

'He's right,' Dicky acquiesced, poking the fire thoughtfully. 'There must be some reason for it.'

'Such as?' asked Tony.

'I dunno.'

They sat without speaking for a time, while Peter groaned uneasily. He was lying in front of the stove, and Dicky watched carefully that the radiated heat did not scorch him.

'It might be something very slight,' Marchmont said at length. 'For instance, sound waves reflected off ice may have some strange property distressing to the ear.'

'But that wouldn't wake us all up in the night,' Tony remarked.

'Quite true. I was only giving an instance of the kind of thing it might be. I don't say it actually *is* that.'

Tony was unconvinced. 'Anything of that kind we would have got used to by now, whereas the thing seems to grow on you.'

He spoke with a certain nervous irritation, and Frazer eyed him anxiously.

'What's the matter with your shoulders?' he asked presently, seeing the boy unconsciously plucking at his heavy jersey.

'Nothing much. They got a bit rubbed carrying the rope last night.'

'Let's have a look,' ordered Frazer.

Tony stripped off his upper garments reluctantly. One side was red and inflamed, on the other the skin was broken, revealing a patch of raw flesh. Frazer got out the medicine chest and applied some soothing ointment and a bandage. When he had finished, Marchmont was fast asleep and Dicky nodding.

For a week one snow-storm after another kept the boys shut up in the cavern. By the end of that time Peter had recovered from the shock of his accident, and although his arm still pained him, the initial helplessness was over, and he could feed himself with his left hand. On the day of their release Marchmont drew Tony aside.

'Will you come with me to the mouth of the fiord and help lay some fishing lines?' he asked.

Tony nodded. 'Is there any hope, do you think?'

'We can only try. Frazer's getting pretty anxious about fresh food, and fish would be better than nothing.'

Next morning by the light of the waning moon they left the cavern, Tony remarking casually that they were going to the ship and thence for a run

over the ice. Marchmont had the lines ready and each had saved a little meat for bait. In an hour they reached the region of the bergs, and found to their satisfaction that there was still open water beyond. They baited their hooks and adjusted the lines to different depths; then making the ends fast to short stakes, they returned to the cavern.

Tony reported the condition of the ice outside, but said nothing of the lines which they had set, and when twenty-four hours had passed he tramped away over the fiord with Marchmont, both in a state of high excitement. The first hook to come up had lost its bait, the second was untouched, the third had on it an appallingly ugly fish four or five inches long, so spiny and repulsive that the boys could hardly bring themselves to detach the barbs from its misshapen head. The other lines were blank.

Marchmont was bitterly disappointed, and was standing with drooping shoulders when Tony caught hold of his arm. The black head of a seal had appeared ten yards from where they stood, and they could see a hint of the black shiny body, rich in oil and meat. With infinite caution Tony crept towards the rifle, put it to his shoulder, and took aim. A shot rang out and the seal turned

over quietly and floated motionless on the water. Marchmont gave a shout of triumph, but Tony dropped the gun in a frenzy of dismay.

'We can't reach it,' he cried, running to and fro along the edge of the ice. The seal, caught in the current which kept the water open, was being carried to the south, and as it drifted away it seemed to be losing buoyancy.

'I'll swim for it,' shouted Tony in desperation.

'No, no,' cried Marchmont.

Tony flung off his outer garments and gathered himself for a spring. Marchmont jumped at him, got his arms round his waist, and hung on. They rolled over in the snow, struggling.

'Let go, I tell you, let go! It's life to us all to get it.'

'It's death to you.'

They fought violently, sobbing and gasping. Tony rained blows on the other's head and shoulders and brought up his knee as a lever. But Marchmont was no longer a weakling; months of incessant toil had had their effect. He hugged his adversary with a desperate strength, until Tony felt his breath going. He relaxed suddenly. The seal had sunk out of sight. The boys rolled apart, Marchmont's face streaming with blood.

'You were right,' said Tony. 'I couldn't have made it.'

They lay for a time, panting.

'There may be others,' said Marchmont at last.

But the sea was empty, and after an hour of watching they went back into the fiord. Frazer heard their story with a grim interest, and began at once to make systematic plans for seal hunting. Half a dozen harpoons were constructed, and a shelter of ice and snow was built close to the water, big enough to hold a man, a rifle, and a little food. So long as the moon lighted up the dark sea a solitary figure sat within the low walls staring endlessly at the ever diminishing water. For days and weeks the vigil went on, broken now and then by violent snowstorms, during which the boys could only roll themselves up in their sleeping-bags and crouch beside the fire. Once Dicky was caught out at the ice-edge by a sudden blizzard and remained there for two days, dragging himself in, at the last, more dead than alive. In a momentary lull, he said, he had looked out and found a seal quite close. When he pulled the trigger nothing had happened, the bolt of the rifle being clogged with frozen oil, and before he could try a harpoon the beast was gone. And so the winter dragged on until, in the last week of December, just as the

frost was winning the final round against the current, Frazer shot two seals on the same day.

That night the boys wallowed in blubber, tearing off huge strips of the stuff and filling their mouths with it. For almost four months they had been starved of fat, and the oozing, oily mess seemed finer to them than the choicest delicacy. When they could stomach no more, their stubbly faces, grimed by weeks of soot, shone and trickled with the fishy-smelling substance, and oil dripped from their fingers. Every scrap was collected and placed in a big iron pot on the stove, where for days the blubber was treated, and the bright yellow oil skimmed off and stored away. The food which in the early days in the pack they had scorned was now to become their staple diet.

Frazer was hopeful that the change of food would dispel the nervous gloom which had come over them all, and from which, try as they would, they could not free themselves. There were moments when Dicky, the most phlegmatic of them all, admitted that he wanted to flee from the place and the horrible fascination which it exerted over him; and the imaginative sufferings of the others were correspondingly greater. But the first week of the New Year passed and brought no lightening of their depression, and indeed it was

not until the middle of February, at a period when they could hardly sleep without waking up in nightmares, that an event happened which made their fears more tangible and altered the whole outlook of their life in the cavern.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE HEART OF THE GLACIER

AFTER the capture of the seals less exertion was demanded of the boys, and the cold was too intense for objectless exercising; they settled down to an indoor existence which had few breaks other than those connected with meals. Frazer and Dicky undertook the cooking, doing their best to vary the dishes with the small selection of ingredients at their disposal; Marchmont and Peter, whose arm was mending satisfactorily, were responsible for the fire day and night, while Tony saw to it that there was always an adequate supply of water for drinking and other purposes. These duties, though occupying only a fraction of the twenty-four hours, had the merit of being ever-recurring and prevented any one from passing a whole day in inactivity. The cooks had to weigh out and check off the rations; Marchmont, and later on, Peter, had to go to the pile of coal on the beach, dig away the snow, sometimes three feet deep, and replenish the small stock of fuel kept in the inner chamber; and Tony's task usually cost him half an hour's chopping and carrying each day.

At first he had melted snow for the water supply,

but the yield of liquid was small when compared with the bulkiness of the solid, and he soon turned his attention to the dense glacier ice which surrounded them. At the back of the store-room he began a small passage, and found great relief in the daily toil of hewing the ice. Instead of enlarging the tunnel at its entrance, he drove steadily into the glacier, vaguely hoping that one day he would come on something of interest. It was warmer at the end of the excavation, he declared, and Marchmont confirmed his observation with a thermometer. As the winter passed the tunnel lengthened, until it had penetrated horizontally some sixty feet from the cavern.

Working alone one night, Tony noticed with surprise that the sound of the axe had taken on a new note: the blows, which were wont to ring, had become dull and lifeless, although the ice appeared unchanged. He was on the point of picking up his buckets and retiring when he observed a short crack quite low down in the wall ahead. He took up the axe, swung it vigorously, and brought it down on the spot. To his astonishment the blade met with no more resistance than in passing through a piece of cardboard; the axe slipped from his hands, fell through an opening, and a second later clanged metallically below.

Tony's impulse was to return to the cavern, but curiosity overcame his caution, and he lay down on the floor and thrust the candle through the cleft.

For some time the flickering flame revealed nothing; he could feel a curious draught of air on his face, and it was not until this ceased that the candle burned up brightly. Six or seven feet below, he saw the axe lying on a flat bed of rock which seemed to form the floor of a fairly extensive chamber. Again a puff of cold air made the candle flicker, and carried to the boy's nostrils an indescribable odour of things pent-up and undisturbed for centuries. He appeared to be looking down from the topmost point of an arching roof which was hung with queer age-old icicles and irregular excrescences. The grey rock beside the axe was scarred and torn by the slow passage of the glacier, and fragments of ice mingled in little heaps with stones and rubble.

Tony withdrew the candle and took out his jack-knife. In two minutes he had enlarged the hole sufficiently to allow his body to pass, and was ready to drop into the strange vault, but the chill blackness below gave him a sudden qualm of misgiving. Again he lowered the candle to make certain that no pit lurked in the floor; then, satisfied with the

inspection, he swung his legs into the opening, worked himself through, and fell lightly on to the rock. The candle remained burning and illumined the weird cell; with a throbbing heart the boy advanced cautiously to the centre and looked slowly round. The low chamber was five or six yards across, and at no point more than eight feet high. On three sides it was completely sealed up, but on the innermost, or landward side, the wall ended a few inches above the floor, leaving a low opening 'twixt rock and ice through which a cat might pass untouched. The eerie aspect of the place made the boy long suddenly for human company; there was nothing to be gained, he thought, by remaining in this oppressive atmosphere. He had turned round to walk back to where he had dropped from the roof when another mysterious gust of air blew past. Quickly he shaded the candle with his hand, but without avail. The flame wavered and recovered, then guttered out. In the darkness Tony fumbled for matches and found that he had none; something akin to panic seized him.

He stumbled forward to where he thought the hole should be, and stretched up his hands. He touched nothing but a long icicle, which broke off and crashed at his feet with a hollow reverberation. Again he tried without result, and realized

in a flash his folly in dropping from a position which might now be out of reach. He remained quite still for a time endeavouring in his mind to picture the roof of the vault.

And then, in the utter blackness, with fifty feet of solid ice between him and any form of illumination, he found himself looking at the axe.

His first thought was that some one had come to the end of the tunnel with a lamp, but an upward glance disproved the idea at once. He shut his eyes tightly, then opened them again in the expectation that the axe would have disappeared. But no, it was still visible, and parts of the rock near it as well. With the horrible certainty that something unaccountable was happening behind his back, he stood rooted to the spot, unable to turn his head, his brain in a whirl. The axe showed up quite clearly for a second longer, then faded away to a dim outline. Terror-stricken, the boy flung himself round expecting he knew not what. There was nothing to be seen; not a break in the dense blackness; rocks, floor, everything, had disappeared. Completely bewildered, he remained as he had turned. Suddenly his heart stood still. On the innermost side of the vault a faint red glow flickered out from the low opening, waxing and waning spasmodically. He gazed fascinated as by

a spell, utterly at a loss to account for what he saw. The glow seemed to consist of hundreds of tiny radiations passing from some inner chamber through the rectangular slit. After a few sporadic outbursts it ebbed slowly away, leaving once more unbroken darkness.

In two strides Tony reached the axe and jumped into the air with his hands extended upwards. His knuckles crashed against the ice, but he tried again and again. He found the opening at last, but his fingers could not keep their grip on the slippery surface and he gave up. The fear which oppressed his heart silenced his voice; the noise of a shout in that awful place would, he knew, scatter the last remnants of his self-control and leave him senseless and paralysed. He waited, strung up and tense, hoping against hope that the whole apparition had been some strange illusion which would not recur. But deep in his consciousness he knew that here lay the source of the vague uneasiness which had haunted them all throughout the winter, and the knowledge added potency to his terrors. Once more the dim glow began to fill the opening. It came and went as before, leaving the boy soaked in a cold perspiration. And then, distant and muffled, he heard Dicky's voice and the sound of his footsteps.

Tony spoke in a dry whisper. 'I'm down here in a cave. Get a rope quick and pull me out.'

Dicky lowered a lamp through the roof; Tony's eyes were glued to the yellow flame.

'Quick,' he gasped. 'For heaven's sake get me out of here.'

'Put your hands up,' said Dicky.

He did so and felt the huge fists close over them. His feet swung off the rock and he came into the lighted tunnel.

'Hurt?' asked Dicky.

'No, no, not hurt. Let me get through.'

He pushed past and ran along the passage to the cavern. The others were in their sleeping bags and were settling down for the night. Frazer saw the boy's face and the battered knuckles.

'Why, what on earth's the matter? You look as though you'd seen a ghost.'

Tony nodded his head, his teeth chattering so that he could not speak. When he had regained control of himself he told the story in broken sentences. The others listened open-mouthed, infected by his obvious fear. Every now and then some one would glance apprehensively towards the tunnel, as though expecting that something might have followed Tony from the inner regions.

'And that's what has been getting us all,' he

finished. 'I've felt the same kind of horror in my sleep for months.'

No one replied. Tony was staring straight ahead of him, and for a time the others did not care to ask questions.

'You are absolutely certain about all this?' said Frazer at last. 'You weren't asleep in there, or anything?'

'Quite certain.'

'The candle-end—what happened to it? It may have rolled away a bit and glowed in the draught.'

Tony shook his head with something like impatience.

'The candle was lying at my feet. I saw it beside the axe. The light was coming from under one of the walls.'

'It couldn't be the reflection from our fire?' said Marchmont.

'It was on the side farthest from here, and it wasn't like firelight; wasn't like anything I've ever seen before.'

'Do you think the island is volcanic,' asked Dicky, 'and that Tony saw the glow from a live crater?'

'Iceland has craters,' said Marchmont, 'although that's far enough away.'

But Tony refused the explanation at once.

‘A volcano would have melted the ice, and there would be fumes too. There was no sulphur or smoke or anything. It was a red glow and yet it didn’t seem warm. That’s the ghostly part about it.’

He shuddered visibly. A silence fell on the group of huddled figures, each member following his own thoughts, but all under the same haunting spell. The knowledge that some unknown agency was at work so close at hand shattered all sense of security and gave free play to imaginative fears. With perplexity Frazer was casting about for a rational explanation, yet feeling instinctively that there was none. He thought of coal beds spontaneously ignited, of oil-wells, of phosphorescence, of the aurora, of fire-damp; he could think of nothing else. Had Tony lost his head simply when the candle went out, and imagined the whole thing? But no, it didn’t seem possible.

‘Are we in any danger? That’s the immediate point.’

‘I don’t see how we can tell,’ said Marchmont.

There was another long silence. Peter broke it to put the question that was in all their minds.

‘Are we going in there to-night?’

‘We’ve got to do something,’ said Dicky, ‘or else beat it.’

Frazer nodded. He knew that he for one could not rest until he had seen with his own eyes what Tony had described, and the others were doubtless in a similar plight. He got up and went to the door. It was a clear cold night, without the vestige of a breeze; even the elements seemed to be engaged in some mystic conspiracy. In the wan starlight the frozen fiord lay gloomy and obscure beneath the encircling cliffs, whose bases were lost among lurking shadows; the ship, listed slightly to port, had a vague and unnatural appearance. He returned to the others.

‘Shall we get ready?’ he said.

They stirred themselves moodily, and worked in silence, oppressed by the task in front of them. Had they heard Tony’s story in more normal circumstances, it would not have carried so much weight, but fitting in as it did with their own nameless fears, they were not inclined to belittle it. It was after one o’clock when they finished their preparations and set out along the tunnel behind Frazer. They arrived at the gaping black hole and stopped in single file.

‘No need to leave any one here, is there?’ whispered Dicky.

‘No, no,’ said Frazer. ‘We’ll go down together.’

Now that they had started he was anxious to

avoid nerve-racking delays, and hastily lowering a rope-ladder into the darkness, he made it fast to a hand-spike and descended rung by rung to the rocky floor. Dicky passed down a lantern and followed. One by one the boys came through the opening and alighted. At the bottom they stood and waited in a tense silence. Nothing happened. At their feet the axe lay where Tony had dropped it. Marchmont's shoulder brushed against a long icicle, which fell with a hollow crash. They started in alarm.

Without speaking, Frazer handed the lantern to Dicky and advanced towards the opening. He dropped on to his knees and bent down until his eye was almost on a level with the floor, then looked through. The boys heard him give a low gasp, and a second later his cheek lighted up with a weird glare. Dicky plucked at his shoulder in alarm, but the other rested motionless on his knees, gazing steadily into the face of the unknown. So long did he remain that Dicky whispered at last:

‘Are you all right?’

Frazer got up and nodded.

‘I can make nothing of it,’ he said in a dry voice, passing a hand across his forehead. ‘Have a look for yourselves.’

Hesitating, the others bent down and peered. The ice continued parallel to the rock for ten feet like a gigantic press arrested in its descent; beyond there was another chamber similar to the one in which they stood. Inside the chamber the rock dipped, then rose up in a curious rounded black cone. It was on this that the boys' eyes were focused; here lay the source of the illumination and at this they stared in utter incomprehension. The dull black surface of the cone, resembling that of a block of carbon, had a strange underhue of luminous red which wavered to and fro, now passing into the heart of the mound and leaving the exterior dark, now coming outwards and concentrating into waves which at the surface were transformed to bright bands of light. Portions of the mound would remain inert for seconds together, then deep down a tiny spark would appear and expand spasmodically until it reached the limits of the mass and threw off a glow which, repeated in half a dozen places, lighted up the cavern. At times the fires, receding together, disappeared completely, leaving the whole vault in darkness; then a sudden recurrence would gather strength and cast a glare of extra brilliance on the rotten walls. On their knees, the boys gazed fascinated. At the nature of the now opaque, now translucent

material they could make no guess; the source of the endless radiations defied their imagination.

Peter broke the silence first. 'It's not alive, nor the work of a living being,' he whispered.

They got up and retired under the entrance, questioning each other in low voices.

'It's so confoundedly soulless,' said Dicky. 'It looks warm, but there's no sign of heat.'

'It reminds me of something,' said Tony, 'but I can't think what.'

'It doesn't remind me of anything,' Frazer remarked huskily. 'No human has ever seen the like before, I'm certain.'

They stood uneasily wondering what the next move was to be. Suddenly Marchmont, who had been exploring in the other direction, stepped forward.

'If any one will come with me, I'll go through.'

'Hold hard,' said Frazer. 'We've no idea what we're up against.'

Dicky put his hand on the ladder. 'I'll get an oar and we'll try that.'

When he returned they lay down on the rock and thrust the blade under the ice. By stretching to the utmost the wood was made to touch the glowing surface. They half expected to see the oar burst into flames, but it seemed to suffer no change.

They left it in contact for half a minute, then withdrew it and examined the wood. There was no apparent alteration and it did not smell.

‘I’ll go with Marchmont,’ said Tony quietly.

The others stared at him.

‘May we go?’ asked Marchmont.

‘Why are you so keen?’ said Dicky.

‘I don’t know. I’ve got a kind of idea—it may be a discovery, an important discovery.’

‘What do you think it is?’

But Marchmont refused to say, and would only repeat his request. Frazer was loath to agree, yet knew that until some solution to the mystery was found they could not rest. A candle was lighted and intruded into the inner cave on the end of the oar. It burned steadily without a flicker.

‘Air’s O.K. anyhow,’ said Peter.

At last Frazer consented reluctantly to Marchmont’s proposition. The passage was too low to permit of his entrance or of Dicky’s, and it was a toss-up if the others could scrape through. Marchmont went to the store-room and came back with a pickaxe, then lay down and thrust his head under the ice. Tony followed suit, and side by side they began to wriggle. As Marchmont’s feet came flush with the entrance, Frazer had a sudden misgiving and put out his hand to

grasp the disappearing heels, but the impulse died away and he let them go.

Half-way through Tony jammed, the ice pinning him down to the rock. As he floundered he thought with horror of the hundreds of tons of solid matter above him, hanging ready, it seemed, to crush him to nothingness. Then his right hand found a hold and he pulled himself clear. A moment later his head came out into the inner vault, and he was coughing out a dry dust which rose about him. Marchmont was already standing upright with something in his hands. It was a bone some ten inches long, and as Tony looked he dropped it on the rock. It fell almost without a sound and crumbled away, and a little cloud of dust got up where it had fallen.

'It's the bone of a polar bear,' whispered Marchmont. 'There's a whole pile just here.'

He took a step towards the glowing mass and extended his arms over it. Tony came beside him and bent down.

'Don't touch it!' Marchmont hissed.

They stood half doubled up, looking at the unearthly luminosity which came and went like fires in the heart of some enormous diamond. At last Marchmont took up the pickaxe and touched the surface with the steel head. Suddenly the metal

began to scintillate at innumerable tiny points along its length.

‘Let’s go,’ said Tony in a hushed voice.

But Marchmont paid no heed. He began striking the side of the mound with the pickaxe, steadily increasing the strength of the blows. At last a fracture appeared, and some fragments detached themselves and slid with astonishing rapidity to the rock. Tony touched one with his foot. It did not move. He pushed it hard but it did not yield.

‘Great Scott!’ he said. ‘It’s stuck to the rock.’

Marchmont paused, then swung the pickaxe hard against the fragment, which was no bigger than a hen’s egg. It shifted a couple of inches along the floor. Marchmont dropped the tool and produced from his pocket a large pair of pliers. He bent down and caught the fragment between the jaws, then pulled.

Uncomprehending, Tony saw the arm-muscles grow tense, and the back rigid. The piece of material lifted slowly.

‘It’s not stuck,’ gasped Marchmont. ‘It’s heavy. Tremendously heavy.’

Tony looked at him in bewilderment, then stepped backwards on top of the bones. Again the fine powder rose up and almost choked him.

'Time we went,' said Marchmont, 'or we may fall into powder as well.'

They crawled back to the outer chamber, where they were met by a fire of questions. Tony did not know how to reply and referred to Marchmont.

'Will you wait here while I go to the ship?' asked the latter. 'I want to fetch something.'

He disappeared up the ladder in a trice.

'He's got an inkling of some kind,' said Frazer, 'which is more than I have.'

'I take my hat off to him,' said Tony with a shiver. 'I'd never have ventured in there if he hadn't dared us. The place is full of bones.'

By and by Marchmont returned, carrying the electroscope from the ship's laboratory. He charged it with a touch of an ebonite rod and watched. It discharged at once. He repeated the experiment with the same result.

'Well, what about it?' said Peter.

When they got back to the living-chamber the fire was almost out; exhausted by the excitement of the night, they sat about in silence while Peter coaxed the stove into activity. Marchmont was squatting with his back to the ice, chin in hand, lost in moody preoccupation. The others, suddenly dependent upon him, waited his pronouncement. But he did not speak. The fire blazed up, and the

hoar-frost which had formed where the breath impinged on muffler or moustache began to melt. Tony, remembering that there was no water, put the heavy iron pot on the stove and flung in some ice.

‘Well, what do you think it is?’ he asked.

They all turned to Marchmont, who started as though he had been asleep.

‘I don’t know,’ he said slowly.

Disappointed, they plied him with questions, which he would not answer. They had half-expected him to furnish a solution to the mystery, and the anticipated relief had made them feel easier. But he refused for the present to put forward the vaguest suggestion.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTERWARDS

THE following day dragged wearily; the routine of small jobs, which had hitherto made their semi-imprisonment bearable, seemed trivial and unimportant, and the boys loafed about in gloomy preoccupation. Peter was frankly afraid and hinted at the supernatural, and, with the exception of Marchmont, the others were half inclined to listen to him. It was in response to an outburst of Peter's that Marchmont finally spoke.

'The thing has got a reasonable explanation if only we can find it,' he began. 'Just as our past fears can be explained by the radiations we've been subjected to.'

'Radiations?'

Marchmont nodded.

'Yes, there's not much doubt about that. The rest of my idea may be nonsense of course. In fact it seems silly to put it forward at all, but—it's the only thing I can think of.'

He paused.

'Come, let's hear what it is anyhow,' said Frazer.

'Well, then, the matter isn't alive and it isn't hot, so there's no combustion taking place in the

ordinary sense. Yet radiations are coming from it powerful enough to damage the ice-wall and the material round about. The only thing I can think of is—radio-activity.'

The boys stared at him.

'You mean it's radium, or something like that?'

'Yes, it may be, only much more powerful. The electroscope proved the radiations, and there's another factor.' He lowered his voice. 'The only explanation that accounts for the facts is that the thing is a new and hitherto undiscovered element.'

There was a long silence. Peter was racking his brains to recollect his scanty smattering of physics.

'But I thought all the elements had *been* discovered, that there were no gaps in the list of elements.'

'Neither are there,' said Marchmont. 'From hydrogen with the lowest atomic weight, right up to uranium with the highest, there are practically no gaps. But there might be an element with a higher atomic weight than uranium although it has never been found before. Such a substance would naturally be highly radio-active.'

No one spoke and Marchmont went on:

'It may be rubbish of course, but there's something else. As you go up the list of elements they become denser. Carbon with an atomic weight of

12 is fairly light, iron at 56 is heavier, lead at 207 is heavier still. Uranium at 238 I don't know about, but it's probably the heaviest of the lot.'

Tony had begun to catch his drift and leant forward with eager eyes.

'Compared with the stuff in there,' said Marchmont, 'lead is as light as thistledown. The piece I lifted was no more than three cubic inches, and it didn't weigh much short of fifty pounds.'

Dicky whistled softly between his teeth.

'By Jove!' said Frazer, 'I believe he's right. It all fits in. But can we prove it?'

Marchmont shook his head.

'I'm afraid not. We'll have to take a piece home before we can be certain.'

'Why, but if you're right,' exclaimed Peter, 'won't the stuff be enormously valuable?'

'I suppose it might,' said Marchmont absently.

'How do you think the bones came there?' asked Tony.

'I don't know, unless they were there before the ice came down,' Marchmont answered. 'An animal would be attracted by the light if it was exposed.'

'And killed by it, too?'

Marchmont looked doubtful. 'Can't say, but I don't think it would be very healthy.'

'We simply must get home with it,' said Tony. 'Why, it would be the discovery of the century.'

'If I'm not making a mistake.'

Frazer was lost in thought. 'Do you think we are safe here?'

'I think we are,' Marchmont replied, 'but, if we ever get away, I shouldn't care to be shipmates with a cargo of the stuff.'

'Do you think it might damage the hull?'

But Marchmont refused to give an opinion.

'I expect the whole idea is rot,' he said dejectedly. 'It's too hopelessly improbable.'

'But so is the whole phenomenon, if it comes to that,' said Frazer. 'Why, it simply must be a new element if only on account of its weight, unless—magnetism might be holding it, and making it appear heavier?'

'I've thought of that,' Marchmont replied. 'But in that case the pickaxe would have been attracted, and it wasn't.'

'It couldn't be that the weight of the glacier on the stuff had compressed it?' asked Peter.

'No, I don't think that would account for its density, although I couldn't be certain.'

'I've got it,' said Tony suddenly. 'Let's go in and get some of the stuff—shall we call it *Frazerite*?

—and put it into a wooden box. We can leave it then for a bit and see if it damages the wood. If it doesn't, we're safe to put some on board the brigantine.'

'Good idea,' Dicky remarked. 'And *Frazerite* is the right name for the stuff.'

'Why not *Fieldingite* or *Marchmontite*?' asked Frazer.

'Because it sounds wrong, and also because you brought us here.'

'Shall we go?' said Tony.

They had not visited the inner vaults since their initial exploration, and they would not have been surprised had a change taken place in the interval. But everything was as it had been, and the strange activity went on without diminution. Marchmont took a canvas bag with him attached to a length of rope, and into this he put the piece of material which he had lifted with the pliers on the previous visit. As they were returning, it made a strange sight to see Dicky bowed down to one side by an apparently empty bag. Just as they reached the living-chamber the stout canvas burst, and the small object fell on to the ice floor and began to sink through it. In alarm, Frazer seized the pick-axe and kept the nugget on the surface until Tony fetched a piece of wood to which it could be trans-

ferred. The nugget made a deep indentation in the plank but remained supported.

‘Beastly awkward stuff to handle,’ said Frazer. ‘If we left it on the beach it would probably fall through the crust and disappear.’

‘Perhaps that’s why there’s none of it on the earth’s surface,’ Dicky remarked.

In the light nothing revealed the inner mysteries of the substance; but for its remarkable weight it might have been taken for a dull-looking lump of coal. Marchmont discovered that fragments were translucent, and that even the smallest pieces had the weird internal glow. He would have spent a long time examining the stuff but Frazer feared for his health and forbade it. A stout wooden box was constructed and the material placed inside it. Through the dark Arctic night the box was carried to the farthest extremity of the beach and set down on the snow.

‘Well, that’s all we can do at present,’ said Tony, ‘but I’d give a good deal to know precisely what it is.’

‘It’s the rummest go I’ve ever been mixed up in,’ Dicky remarked.

About the date of the discovery the sun had come above the horizon, making its first appearance for over three months, and now the days were begin-

ning to lengthen appreciably. But so engrossed were the boys in their find and its possibilities that the time slipped by unnoticed. Marchmont had to recount to them over and over again all he knew of radium and radio-activity, and the uses to which radium was put. At last Tony, rooting round in the ship's laboratory, discovered a fairly modern book on physics which devoted a chapter to the subject. They read it aloud to one another stretched about the stove, and puzzled for days over the mathematical obscurities with which it was filled. Frazer alone was noting the passage of the spring; his tasks of marking off the days on the calendar and winding the chronometers kept him in touch with the advance of the season, and made him wonder when the ice of the fiord would break up and set the brigantine free once more. Sometimes he felt hopeful that with the whole season ahead of them they would be able to reach the Siberian coast or Novaya Zemlya, but more often he thought with dismay of their fruitless efforts of the previous summer, and wondered, while the others were talking so cheerfully, if they would ever bring their discovery back to civilization.

They were sitting over a frugal supper one evening when Marchmont jumped up suddenly.

'Great Scott! What a chump I am.'

The others looked at him.

'I've just thought of something I should have thought of weeks ago.'

'What is it?' asked Peter.

Marchmont sat down again. 'Too late to do anything to-night,' he said. 'I'll let you know if it works.'

Next day at noon he came from the ship into the cavern and held up something proudly. It was a photographic plate uniformly dark save for a clear disk in the middle.

'I exposed it to a piece of *Frazerite* in the dark-room with a coin in the middle of the plate. You see the coin has protected it, and everywhere else the silver is reduced. It's a sure proof of radiations!'

No one spoke. They had all taken Marchmont's theory so much for granted that his obvious relief at this confirmation was a trifle upsetting.

'What's the matter with your hand?' said Dicky.

Marchmont had taken off his gloves, exposing a bright red patch of skin just behind the knuckles.

'I let a bit of the stuff fall on it. It's nothing much—doesn't hurt at all.'

'H'm,' said Frazer looking at it, 'we'll need to be careful what we're doing. It looks to me like a very bad burn.'

Two days later a running sore developed and inflammation began to extend up the wrist. Marchmont was feverish and restless and had to be taken care of. Knowing of nothing better, Frazer made him steep his hand constantly in almost boiling water, but the poison spread. On the fourth night his arm was stiff and swollen as far as the shoulder, and Frazer began to despair. It was on the left side and the inflammation was perilously near the heart. For forty-eight hours Marchmont lay delirious, while the others hardly moved save to tend him. The almost unbroken torrent of senseless and anguished phrases wore them out and induced a desperate melancholy, so that when at last it ceased and Frazer declared the forehead cooler, they could hardly believe that the worst was passed. When the fever finally left him Marchmont was so weak that he could scarcely lift a finger, and it was long before his strength began to return. There were no delicacies with which to feed him, and his stomach revolted against the everyday fare. Dicky, who cooked the substitute for bread, spread out the dough very thin and made wafer-like cakes, and these Marchmont would nibble occasionally. But there was little nourishment in the diet, and he made poor progress until Dicky hit on the scheme of working a small quantity of seal fat into

the cakes. Then and then only did he begin to pick up.

The seal meat by this time was all consumed, and the boys were living on unleavened bread and half a pound of oil each per day. Previously they had been left to dispose of the oil in whatever way they chose, but after Dicky's experiment, part of it was handed over to him to use with the dough, the resulting mixture when cooked being much more palatable than the old concoction of flour, water, and salt. With economy, the seal oil should last till the end of April, Frazer reckoned, and by that time bird life would be returning, and the weather more suitable for hunting.

Marchmont's illness served for a period to distract the boys' attention from the mineral in the vault, or when they thought of it, they did so as of something malevolent and threatening. They talked now of home, of green fields remembered, of hot still days and cricket matches, of luscious fruits and fresh salads. The longing for vegetable food was intense and sometimes coloured their thoughts for hours. Only Marchmont's enthusiasm over the discovery never waned, and when he was strong enough to talk he began to draw back their interest.

In the meantime the sun was mounting higher

in the sky, and days of mildness began to break the seemingly everlasting thralldom of bitter cold. Coming in one afternoon from the fiord where he had been on the look-out for game, Dicky reported open water in the distance, and a fortnight later the ice in the fiord itself began to be disturbed. The time had almost come, Frazer decided, to begin to get the ship ready for sea.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CALVING OF THE BERG

IT might have been something dropped by Frazer about preparations for sailing, or it might have been simply an unaccountable premonition that threw Peter one night into a mood of strange perceptiveness. Coming into the cavern with some buckets of coal after the others had gone to sleep, he found himself more vividly aware of his surroundings than he had been for months past. He set about his usual duty of making up the fire so that it would last for many hours, then, finding that Dicky had encroached on his customary sleeping-place, he took his blankets and moved to a position between the stove and the door, and lay down.

He felt no inclination for sleep, and, propping his head up on a couple of seaboots, he began to take stock of the familiar scene. During the worst of Marchmont's illness a raised platform of packing cases had been constructed on one side of the cavern so that he could be more readily tended, but now he was well enough to take his place on the floor, and lay as the others, with his feet near the warmth and his head almost touching the wall.

Peter thought of Marchmont's illness and its mysterious cause, then lost himself again in the contemplation of objects. Tony's pot of ice had been on the stove for some time and was steaming gently; the vapour rising up condensed again and froze on the arched roof, which was smoothed and blackened by the winter's accumulation of soot and hoar frost. It was a little lower now than it had been when they hewed it out, Peter thought, owing to this condensation of vapour and breath. In the inner cavern he could distinguish by firelight the cask of seal fat and a pair of skis leaning up against it, and beyond, a confused heap of canvas and ropes. The flour bag stood just inside the living chamber and was almost empty; the familiar, dusty white cotton with its red-and-blue design awoke for an instant a far-off memory of a childhood's visit to a granary. It was the same brand of flour that he had seen then, he was almost certain, although it had never occurred to him before.

His ears began to grow cold, and he could feel a draught coming under the canvas flap at the end of the tunnel. He put out his hand and adjusted the heavy folds, remembering that the woollen helmet which he usually wore at night was in a little niche carved out of the ice at the head of his customary couch. There were five such niches in

which the boys kept small personal belongings, and each of which was supposed to be sacred to its owner. Peter felt that he could not reach the helmet without disturbing Dicky, and presently, the cold getting the better of him, he slipped down under the blankets and covered up his head.

It had been a remarkably cosy habitation throughout the winter, he reflected, and thought of the days when to go outside had been an act requiring real courage and fortitude, when the cold struck home acutely and the atmosphere bore a deadly hostility to human life. His face and lips were blackened and cracked still as the result of a short expedition made with Frazer a few weeks before; the early spring had been the bitterest of all, but now the real cold was probably over for the season. His thoughts worked round again, as they always did, to the secret vault in the heart of the glacier, and to its significance. Without Marchmont's knowledge and clear-cut reasoning they would probably have fallen into a superstitious panic, he felt. Marchmont more than any one had steadied them all through that crisis. He suddenly lost the thread of his thoughts and knew that he was on the point of sleep.

Two miles away at the mouth of the fiord something was moving stealthily among the bergs and

across the broken floes. The current had re-established its sway over the ice at this point, and progress along the outer coast was barred by open water; the bear slowly realized this, and presently headed inwards, skirting the cliffs on the sound ice about their base. After a vast amount of twisting and turning it caught sight of the brigantine, and paused. For minutes it waited sniffing warily; then, reassured, it advanced towards the hull, and standing on its hind legs, looked over the forsaken decks. Unfamiliar odours beyond its powers of analysis came to its nostrils, odours suggesting nothing within its experience, but nevertheless pleasing to the senses. The bear was but recently awakened from its winter sleep, and hunting had been poor; the body under the shaggy exterior was lank and hunger-driven. With an awkward spring it surmounted the bulwarks and began to perambulate about the decks. The place so rich in promise seemed to be filled with the ghosts of edibles; the elusive smells could not be run to earth although they were all-pervading. This, however, was not quite without precedent, and indicated to the bear that it had arrived on the scene too late.

It scrambled back to the ice and continued its wanderings in search of food. Presently it found

a line of scent and followed it silently; the way led across the broken ice at the fringe of the beach and on to the beach itself. Here there was a confusion of indications, and, irresolute, the animal swung its head from side to side, nose in air. At last it advanced towards the ice-cliff which ran at right angles to the shore; a few inches above the level of its eyes the tunnel mouth opened. Again it reared itself up and sniffed. The same odours that it had met with on the ship greeted it, but there was a subtle warmth here that was not lost on the animal. Erect and tense it remained, its head already advanced a little way in the opening, while the enticing smells drifted gently past. It jumped noiselessly on to the low sill and went forward.

Coming out of a deep sleep, Peter had the sensation of fighting upwards through yards of thick, slimy liquid which clogged his movements and contracted his chest. As he tried to break the surface the struggle became more fierce, and he seemed to be encountering some terrible malicious force which pressed him steadily downwards. He plied his hands impotently with a desperate feeling of suffocation, and opened his eyes. For a second the vividness of the dream possessed his mind and he saw nothing. Then suddenly he knew that there *was* something pressing on his chest. A sickening

fetid smell filled his nostrils and drew his attention momentarily from the weight on his body. He rolled his head to one side and a shudder ran over him. His eyes tight shut again; he thought it was still a dream and dared not look up. Then the pressure on his ribs increased, and the odour of the beast's breath almost overpowered him. He opened his eyes and saw six inches away the red gums and black, ribbed palate, the yellow fangs. The thought sprang to his mind, 'Where will it begin?'

An intense horror of the open mouth coming any nearer to his face made him rigid; he was on the point of swinging his fist into the brute's under-jaw when he became aware that it was no longer attentive to him alone. At the same moment he heard Dicky whisper, 'Keep quite still,' and almost fainted with the sense of deliverance.

Dicky was stretching backwards with his right hand for a rifle which stood against the wall. As he groped he kept his face towards the bear, which in turn watched him in a fascinated immobility. He found the gun, reassured himself that it was loaded, and levelled it slowly. So near was the animal's head that Peter seemed to be looking down the barrel of the rifle. With the heavy paw still on his chest, he held his breath and awaited

the shot. It came, in a flash of flame and a terrific concussion.

Peter thought wildly, 'The bullet glanced and has killed me.' The illusion was helped by the thick smoke and the spurt of blood which fell on his face. Certainly he was dead or dying or why should everything be in motion? The bear, the smoke, and he himself were gliding away, gliding smoothly but unmistakably. A hideous nausea gripped him. He had lost touch with physical reality it seemed, for everything about him was swaying and slanting. Some one was yelling in a high-pitched, panic-stricken voice.

Then the movement ceased and there was a slight shock; the walls of the cavern suddenly came horizontal, the roof swept over and appeared below the level of his feet. For a moment he struggled to escape rolling down into this abyss, but the slope was too much for him. He overbalanced forwards, and, in company with the bear's carcase, fell heavily into the dome. An instant later he was buried in a struggling mass of limbs. Something touched his hand causing him agonizing pain; he snatched it away, fully convinced now of his return to life. Glowing coals intermingled with human arms and legs, and he had a momentary picture of the stove standing on its head. A stream

of hot liquid ran against his calf, but he was too bewildered to move his leg till he felt the burn.

Confused shouts of astonishment and pain came to his ears. Except for Dicky, the others had been flung out of their sleep by the shattering roar of the gun, and, before they could recover, this new and inexplicable disaster was upon them. Marchmont's hair was on fire, and he struggled desperately to release his arms from the writhing mass in which they were imprisoned, until Tony dropped a blanket over his head and extinguished the flames. Frazer was fighting off the stove which rolled and pushed him into a corner; the cavern was filled with sulphurous fumes, biting to the throat. Another tilt and the bear's carcase came tumbling down, carrying everything before it—the five boys found themselves jammed together against the wall. A horrible smell of singeing flesh arose.

‘Any one on fire?’ Dicky choked out.

Marchmont was clutching his head with both hands, muttering nonsensically. The boys tore themselves free from the bear whose nose was thrust against the stove. Some one struck a match, revealing chaos. What had been the floor was now above their heads, for odd articles stuck there and hung downwards. Part of the wooden grating on which they had slept was still in position, half-

frozen into the ice. As the match flickered out the grating detached itself and fell with a crash, clear of every one. Marchmont groaned.

There was a faint lap-lapping, then a trickling sound.

‘Water,’ said Frazer dazedly. ‘We must get out.’

Another match flared up. The boys could see a steady flow coming through the entrance. It grew as they watched. Frazer, remembering how the beach shelved steeply to one side, began to have an inkling.

‘Quick!’ he shouted suddenly. ‘Get out quick. We’ve broken off: we’re inside a floating berg.’

Nobody moved. They were all paralysed with bewilderment. The place began to tilt again and the stream became a cascade. Marchmont groaned. Frazer turned to him and dealt him a kick, then treated Peter likewise.

‘Get out, I tell you!’

The boys sprang up and made for the gaping hole through which water was rushing. As he went, Peter saw the flour bag and, without thinking, flung it over his shoulder. Wet to the knees and almost carried off his feet, he reached the outer end of the tunnel in company with Marchmont. Tony was following, but could not gain the outside without pushing the others into what was unmistakably the

sea. Eight feet behind in the inverted cavern Frazer could feel the berg steadily settling down to one side, and knew that soon the entrance would be submerged. If those in front did not clear the tunnel at once he and Dicky would be trapped, and drowned like rats.

In the entrance Peter and Marchmont crouched awkwardly, staring aghast at the ship. Her cables had parted and she was drifting away from the beach before a strong breeze; already she was a hundred yards off and was fast gathering way. Tony thrust his head forward.

‘Clear out, you idiots, or you’ll drown us all.’

‘Where?’ asked Marchmont.

‘Climb up on top, or swim for it,’ Tony yelled.

Peter looked wildly about, then saw a ledge leading upwards on the right which offered a foothold. He rose, and pressing himself against the ice, clambered precariously to the upper surface of the berg. Dragging a rifle, Tony came at his heels, then helped Marchmont. The ice underfoot was scarred and dirty by late contact with the earth, and Peter understood in a flash what had happened. The concussion of Dicky’s shot had factured the glacier just at the inner vaults, and the detached mass of ice had slipped off the land into deep water and turned over. The wave thrown up must have

lifted the ship clear of the bottom, parted her moorings, and set her adrift. Peter realized that they were in deadly danger of losing her, and losing for ever their hope of escape.

But the berg had not yet attained equilibrium and was again on the point of capsizing. Tony saw Frazer and Dicky at the entrance below, and with a gasp of relief turned and fled up the slope.

‘Get on top as it rolls over,’ he shouted.

Coming out on the right side of the tunnel, Frazer found the ledge at once, and leapt along and upwards. The berg began to roll round as he dashed up the face towards the summit. When he reached the ridge he was confronted by a steep downward slope on which the younger boys were already crouched. Even as he stepped on to it, it swung up to meet him, and there was a shout behind followed by a splash, dimly heard in the commotion of the churned-up water. The berg swayed to and fro for a little, then came to rest.

The boys stood up gingerly and looked about for Dicky. He was nowhere to be seen. The berg had moved away from the beach a greater distance than any of them could swim in the icy water, any of them save Dicky.

‘The boat——’ Frazer began, and stopped short.

Already the ship was in the middle of the fiord,

moving broadside to the wind; the ebb-tide was carrying her straight for the open sea. The boys looked helplessly from the ship to the beach and back again to the water at their feet. Suddenly ten yards away something broke the surface, and Dicky's head appeared, the mouth open and gasping in the air noisily. Frazer shouted, and Dicky signalled that he understood. He rested for a few seconds, then turned over and began to plough his way towards the shore. The boys waited silently, watching the bobbing head and the powerful arms curving and dipping, curving and dipping, with steadfast regularity. A sudden cramp, Frazer was thinking, and the lot of them would perish. Not that there was much hope in any case.

But Dicky did not falter until he was breasting the margin of brash-ice about the beach, where swimming was no longer possible. He found bottom at last, staggered ashore, and ran stiffly to the boat. It was fourteen feet long and heavy, and lay upside down. With one mighty heave he righted it and slewed it round stern to the water. The others watched his exertions in amazement; he seemed to have the strength of five men. Foot by foot he dragged the boat down the beach, the muscles of his back standing out through the bedraggled clothes in tense curves. Only once he

paused to shift his footing and gain breath. Months afterwards, when told of the single-handed launching of this boat, men were to shrug their shoulders and look incredulous. But it was accomplished by Dicky in a moment of supreme strength.

On the berg Frazer remembered that there was only one oar and came near to despair. When Dicky arrived they pushed back in haste to the beach to find substitutes; there was almost nothing to be had. The ship was now far out in the entrance, but Frazer waited while the boat was ballasted with coal. Just as they were leaving, Marchmont staggered down the shore with a small wooden box in his hands. He dropped his burden in the stern and seized a plank. On one side Dicky pulled the oar, on the other the four of them wielded whatever came first to their hands. The beach was empty of food, all their supplies were submerged in the berg, and when the boat came on to her course, the ship had passed out of sight.

CHAPTER XX

PURSUIT OF THE SHIP

It was long before any one spoke. They were paddling now for their lives, for a slender chance of life, and in the cold morning light were realizing it to the full. When at last they came out into the open sea the ship was a good two miles away and travelling fast; faster than they were, though they dared not admit it.

‘How many cartridges have we got?’ said Frazer suddenly.

‘Rifle’s full, all but the one that did the damage,’ Dicky replied.

‘I’ve got two clips,’ said Tony.

‘That all?’

No one replied. Frazer, who had given up paddling in order to steer between the floes which littered their course, picked up the flour-bag and put it away carefully in the stern-locker. There was ten or twelve pounds in it, enough to feed them in a sort of a way for two days. And only seventeen cartridges. That was all between them and starvation.

At midday Frazer changed places with Dicky,

but in his soaking clothes the latter could not stand the inactivity and begged to be allowed to pull again. All day the grim race went on, sometimes the boat, sometimes the ship, gaining ground. Once the ship was held up for half an hour in an ice-barrier and the boat almost halved the distance between them. But the ship broke clear at last and sailed away incredibly quickly. The sky had been growing more and more leaden, and towards five o'clock snow began to fall; the wind increased in violence and the sea rose short and choppy, breaking every now and then over the stern of the boat. For three hours longer they struggled on, keeping the ship in sight; then in a dense flurry of snow-flakes she was suddenly lost to view.

At the same time a breaking wave threw a great block of ice almost on board the boat, and Frazer saw that they must shelter soon or be smashed up. He turned the craft under the lee of a biggish floe and shouted to Peter in the bow to jump for it with the painter. Laboriously they hauled the boat on to the heaving ice, emptied it, and turned it over. They had no canvas to make a shelter, no blankets, no way of starting a fire. Peter had matches, but all the wood which was available was soaked and covered with ice.

Crouching under the upturned boat, Frazer scooped out a hollow in the ice, poured some flour into it, and mixed the flour with water. The dough was divided into five parts and passed round. No one spoke. Frazer was wondering if they had done rightly in setting off thus in pursuit of the ship. But now that their stores were gone what better would they have been ashore? And without the ship they were shut off completely and for ever from the outer world.

They lay down at last huddled together for warmth, and dozed miserably through the short night hours. When on the second morning they took to the water, the ship was still invisible, but Frazer knew that she must be somewhere to leeward and held on the course as best he could without a compass. All day they twisted and turned between small floes through which the ship could have charged easily, but which were dangerous obstacles to an open boat. The wind was steady from the north-east and the temperature low. Frazer's shoulders and head were covered with ice from the spray which flew over the stern, and the makeshift paddles became so clogged and heavy, that they had to be chipped clear every hour. In the intervals when crossing open patches of water Frazer whittled a broken plank into long

shavings which he thrust under his jersey next the skin.

At two in the afternoon Dicky suddenly complained of his face, and Frazer found that part of it had a thin coating of ice under which the flesh was frozen. By the time the circulation was restored Tony, who had taken over the oar, was in the same state; it was evidently not possible to keep facing the wind, and when Dicky resumed his position he turned his back to the stern and pushed the oar. But they were all weakening fast from exposure and lack of food and sleep, and had it not been for the breeze the boat would hardly have made a mile an hour. The paddlers fared worst; every now and then a lurch of the craft would wet them half-way up to the elbows, and the water, freezing on their sleeves, cut their wrists unmercifully.

Once, rising on a high crest, Frazer thought he saw the yards and topmasts of the brigantine far ahead, but he said nothing about it at the time, and failing to catch another glimpse, put it down as a delusion. At six o'clock he felt there was little more to be had out of his crew, and gave the signal to rest; the boat lost some way but continued to go slowly ahead, answering her helm. Frazer called Dicky aft and spoke a few words, then

thrust the bundle of dry shavings into his hand. Between the two midships thwarts Dicky cleared a space and started a fire on top of a close-packed layer of coal; there was sufficient water in the bottom of the boat to prevent the fire or heat from spreading downwards and damaging the planking. For half an hour the flames flickered uncertainly, then the coals began to glow red and the fire was established. Frazer took the flour from the locker and passed it forward. Dicky divided it in two parts and began to knead the dough into little cakes, which he baked on the hot coals. The boys watched him with intent eyes and the horrible ache of acute hunger; their self-control was strained to the last extreme in preventing themselves from seizing the food out of his hands, or snatching it off the fire.

All night the boat drove before the wind while the boys steered in turn. Twice the oar had to be got out to clear a floe, but the ice was much broken up and for the most part easily avoided. Amidships the coal burned sulkily, throwing up a red glow on the trail of smoke which stretched out ahead. Doubled up in cramped attitudes, the boys huddled round the warmth, their bodies half-frozen on one side, half-burned on the other. Every now and then an eddy of wind would draw

the fumes this way and that into their faces, or a shower of spray would brush over them and sizzle on the coals; once Tony, half asleep at the helm, let the boat broach to, so that a beam sea, falling in heavily over the starboard gunwale, almost extinguished the fire, and soaked those around it. They baled the water out with their naked hands, and lay down again on the coals.

At eight o'clock Frazer called for another effort, but only Tony and Dicky responded; the others were too exhausted to conquer the deadly stiffness of their limbs, and sprawled motionless in the bottom of the boat. The day was bitterly cold and the visibility poor; the boat went slowly ahead in a grey world of ice, snow, and curling waves. The floes were becoming more tightly packed now, and at last the partially open water ended, and they were threading their way in and out among great ice-fields. Towards midday Tony collapsed and tumbled off the thwart; Dicky and Frazer exchanged a glance in which they read each other's admission of despair.

For hours they lay without moving in a little cove filled with brash-ice. The fire had been abandoned, for the boys had no longer the strength to keep themselves from rolling into it when the boat moved, and Dicky did not try to cook the

remainder of the flour. When it was all eaten the bag was cut into strips and chewed. But even that came to an end, and when night drew down once more there was no particle of food in the boat. Tony had revived a little and offered to paddle or pull the oar; the wind, however, had dropped, and with a starless sky Frazer did not know which way to steer.

The night dragged miserably by. Every two hours Frazer or Dicky raised a head above the gunwale and looked about, but nothing happened except that the boat became frozen in by young ice which covered the bay. In the morning this ice extended a hundred yards out from the stern and shut off all hope of moving.

When the daylight was fully come Frazer took the rifle and landed on the floe. He ached in every bone and went over the snow staggering like a drunken man, the butt of the gun trailing behind him. Arriving at a fairly high hummock, he dropped the weapon and climbed up on his hands and knees. Not two hundred yards away, on the other side of the floe, the brigantine was lying broadside to the ice, her yards awry, and cordage hanging down in bights and festoons. The bowsprit was snapped off just before the knightheads, and, held by a mass of twisted ropes, trailed in the water beneath the



THE BRIGANTINE WAS LYING BROADSIDE TO THE ICE, HER YARDS AWRY, AND CORDAGE HANGING DOWN IN BIGHTS AND FESTOONS.

figurehead. Lacking support from forward, the foretopmast had sprung back and slackened up the backstays, so that it seemed almost to be leaning against the main. Frazer stared for a time, then returned to the boat and broke the news; the others gazed at him stupidly but did not budge.

He sat down weakly on the snow and explained over and over again. They did not believe him or understand that he wanted them to move. At last he succeeded in rousing Dicky and Tony, and with their help dragged the others somehow to the ship. And then began a search for food, a search that was almost in vain. During the winter the store-room had been emptied, and the only hope lay in finding something which had previously eluded them. By and by Dicky joined in the hunt, and together they scoured the ship. Behind some empty bottles at the back of one of the saloon cupboards they found a large tin of condensed milk, and ransacking the mate's cabin, which had not been disturbed since he left it, a box of very hard sea-biscuits, of a brand for which he had had a strong partiality. That was all.

Fortunately a quantity of coal remained in the bunkers. They lighted a fire in the saloon, and warming themselves before it, ate a meal which

reduced the supplies by half. As soon as Marchmont was revived he asked if the wooden box had been brought off from the boat, and finding that it hadn't, would have set out himself to fetch it had not Frazer forbidden him. Later on Dicky took a length of rope and pulled the small heavy cube over the snow to the ship. Under the influence of the warmth and the slender ration of food they all felt better for a time, but the situation was too grim to bear discussion, and they soon relapsed into silence. The chronometers had run down, and the spare sextant in the chart-room was valueless; Frazer could only make the vaguest guess at their position, and when Peter suggested that they might try to reach the land again he did not trouble to explain the uselessness of the idea. They could only drift now and starve, unless they happened across a seal or a wandering bear.

Next morning they again halved what was left of the biscuits and milk, and boiling it all up with water, made a thin gruel. The amount of solid was so slight that the meal hardly affected their desperate craving for food, and their bodies failed to respond to the stimulus. The day passed uneventfully. The ship had dislodged herself from the ice and drifted idly on the light breeze; Dicky and Frazer took turns of keeping a look-out, the

loaded rifle ready to hand; the others lay about in the saloon too weak almost to stoke the fire.

That night Tony roused himself and made a proposal that staggered the others. If they shared out the food equally, he said, they would all be helpless in a couple of days and incapable of killing a seal if it turned up. On the other hand, they might reserve all the supplies for one man, the fittest among them, who could then last for a week and so greatly increase the chances of shooting game in the long run. The others would manage to keep alive somehow, if there was no call for them to stir. Tony had his eye on Dicky while he spoke, and following his glance, they all stared at the begrizzled, frost-bitten face. But Dicky shook his head.

‘I couldn’t do it,’ he said. ‘I’d go mad all by myself. No, no, let’s all share alike to the end.’

‘We’d stand a better chance if you did it,’ Tony repeated.

‘It wouldn’t be fair,’ said Frazer. ‘Suppose nothing happened by the end of the week, it—it would be lonely for the man left.’

They took a vote on it at last. Marchmont sided with Tony, but the other three were agreed, and the matter dropped. On the third morning on the ship they ate the final meal.

After that the passage of days and nights became blurred and unreal. Dicky and Frazer, and occasionally Tony, spent some time on deck, but for hours together they all lay in a dazed state in the saloon, while the ship drifted, heedless and unheeded, through the endless floes and ice-fields. Sometimes the sun shone, lighting up the desolate cabin through the skylight, and the cold illumination seemed to mock them with its pale suggestion of warmer climes and distant lands. One day Frazer shot a skua, which had alighted on the pack near by, but he was so weak that he had to call Dicky to retrieve it. They boiled it, hardly waiting to remove the feathers, and divided the flesh and bones. It was only a mouthful each and was gone in an instant, down to the very marrow. This was the last incident which any of them remembered clearly.

How many days longer they remained sunk in a deadly stupor they could not tell. At first by superhuman efforts they kept the fire going, but later on it burned low, went out, and grew cold, so that Tony, crawling towards it to slake his thirst from the pot of drinking-water, found only a block of ice, and, too overcome to creep back to his place, remained where he lay beside the stove. Coming out of a nightmarish world of torment, Peter saw

him lying there, and, thinking that he had found some unnoticed crumbs of food, tried to reach him. But his strength gave out half-way, and he sank in a huddled heap on the bare floor, where the cold gripped him until he was lost in a merciful oblivion.

After a long spell of semi-consciousness on the curved settee at the fore-end of the cabin, Dicky was suddenly aware of something unfamiliar on the deck above. He listened intently and tried to rise on his elbow. The effort exhausted him and he fell back with his head swimming. When his brain was clear again the sound had drawn closer. It must be a bear, he thought dimly. If only he could shoot it. Some last remnant of strength returned to him and he began to roll off the settee. He landed with a thump on the floor and lay still for a time. The brute seemed to be at the top of the companionway—was going to come down, perhaps, and eat them. He got to his hands and knees and tried to crawl across the cabin. Where was the gun? He could not remember. He could not think of any weapon at all. There were his fists, of course. Get it by the throat. He heard the door at the top of the ladder burst open, and looked upwards. He pulled off his gloves laboriously and hooked his fingers. The nails had grown

long like talons he noticed, with an insane kind of satisfaction. They would pierce and tear.

Something was entering, something dark-coloured and upright. It was not a bear. It was a man. A moment later he recognized Captain Frazer, and, collapsing sideways on to the floor, lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XXI

THE RESCUE

It was many days before the boys were well enough to listen intelligently to the story of their rescue, to hear how the brigantine had been in sight for almost a week from the relief ship now alongside, and how every attempt to send help across the broken ice-fields had failed; how the pack had opened suddenly and allowed the powerful craft to push its way at last across the intervening miles, to arrive in the nick of time.

The boys were fed with small, carefully graded doses of food, and they all pulled round in the end, although for some time Marchmont, weakened by his recent illness, made no progress and came near to dying in the midst of plenty. The saloon was converted into a sick-bay and every care and attention lavished on the patients; they could hardly believe that it was not all a dream from which they might wake up suddenly to find themselves alone and starving once more. But they were convinced at last, and one night, deeming them sufficiently recovered, Captain Frazer told them all that had happened since the fateful morning when he had pulled ashore to the Norwegian coast.

'You remember I stopped the boat to shout back to you what we would do if it came on to blow,' Captain Frazer began. 'I had a sudden qualm of uneasiness at that moment, and it was on the tip of my tongue to cancel the trip there and then. But a sailor's training is all against acting on unaccountable whims, and I told myself I was getting over-nervous and went on. We had a good deal of trouble in landing, and after pulling back and forwards for half an hour or so, were forced to enter the mouth of the river. It was very fast-flowing, and it took us all our time to make anything against the current.'

They had landed finally a few hundred yards from the actual coast and, as the tide was on the ebb, a man was left behind to keep the boat afloat. The remainder of the party had pushed inland for some hours, but the threat of a change in the weather turned them back long before they reached their objective. A mile from the estuary they were met by the seaman, half-distracted over his failure to perform a simple duty. There had been odd lumps of ice coming down the river it seemed, but the man had paid no heed to them. The water was receding fast, and at last it had been necessary to cast loose the painter and find a new mooring. With the rope in his hand the sailor was looking

about for a likely boulder, when a big fast-traveling floe caught the bows of the boat and away she went. There was no projection on which to take a turn, and after a vain struggle with the slipping rope, the man had been forced to let go.

‘The poor chap was beside himself,’ Captain Frazer continued, ‘and we were all too concerned about the ship to rate him for his carelessness. In the morning when we found that you had gone we set out to return overland to Tromso. It took us a week.’ He paused and sipped a little coffee from the mug before him. ‘The first thing I did was to wire to London for money. I wanted to charter a sealer to look for you. There was no reply to my wire, nor to a second one. It took another week for me to find out that my man of business had absconded, leaving me penniless.’

‘Branscombe!’ said Frazer in astonishment. ‘I always thought he was thoroughly straight.’

‘So did I,’ replied the captain with a touch of bitterness. ‘But it’s ancient history now. To cut a long story short, I had to go to England before I could raise enough money to do anything. It took time, as you can imagine, and when finally we sailed, the summer was almost gone.’

The sealer after all had turned out to be badly found, and at the end of a month’s vain searching

her owner and skipper had declared that the season was too far advanced to linger among the ice. The gale which had driven the *Widgeon* beyond Novaya Zemlya decided him finally, and despite Captain Frazer's most powerful protestations, they had returned to port. Then and then only did they hear of the sealer which had sighted the brigantine some weeks before.

'It was useless to try to do anything. Short of buying a ship and getting a crew by bribery, I couldn't stir north of the port again before the spring. And I had no money and no prospects of getting any. I'm being quite frank over the money side of the business. When I reached London in the end of October I was hard pressed to pay for lodgings.'

He glanced round the circle of listeners.

'Your people, of course, had done all they could towards the first search, had made great sacrifices so that no time should be lost, and I hardly dared face them without news. When Christmas came funds for a properly run relief expedition were as remote as the moon. I wanted to go north prepared to spend a year, two years, searching first of all this part of the Arctic Sea, then the coast of Novaya Zemlya. And I despaired of being able to do it.'

Captain Frazer lit a cigar with a hand that shook perceptibly.

‘One morning, after a week of failure, I found a letter waiting for me with a Hamburg postmark. It had been addressed to the Admiralty and had followed me round several places I had put up at temporarily. The handwriting and signature were both unfamiliar, and at first I couldn’t make out what it was all about. But it was soon clear enough. It was an offer from some one whom I took to be a perfect stranger, of a ship specially built for ice work, fully equipped and manned, an offer covering as long a period as I cared to name. The letter was signed “Silberstein”, and for the life of me I couldn’t think who he was. He had read of the business in the newspapers and wanted to help, it seemed, but there was a personal note in the phrasing which made me feel I ought to know the writer.

‘And then it dawned on me quite suddenly. Silberstein meant nothing, but Count Silberstein recalled at once a man whom I had always thought of simply as “the Count”. In the summer of 1917 I sank the submarine which he commanded, and afterwards pulled him and a few other survivors out of the water. He seemed very much surprised at being saved, and when I handed him over to

the authorities, swore that he wouldn't forget my generosity, as he called it. Well, he didn't forget, remembered in fact to the tune of fitting out this present expedition, and bringing us together here.'

Captain Frazer paused.

'His ship, the *Wismar*, was built for winter work in the Baltic, and short of being an icebreaker, is about the last word for power and strength afloat. Without her we shouldn't have been within a hundred miles of finding you. In fact you can reckon the Count as your rescuer, nothing more or less.'

'By Jove! we hadn't realized all that,' said Frazer. 'I wondered why the people looking after us were foreign. Is the Count up here himself? Can we thank him?'

'Yes, he has been on board once or twice, and to-morrow he's coming over to pay his respects officially.'

The boys broke out into a lively discussion of the captain's tale. Frazer fetched the ship's log, and they compared the relative positions of the brigantine and the sealer during the previous autumn. At one time, immediately before the gale in September, the vessels could not have been more than thirty miles apart, almost within sight of one another in fact. Captain Frazer had already

heard the outline of the boys' adventures, but owing to the presence of strangers from the *Wismar*, nothing had been said of the discovery. Assuring himself that there was no one within earshot, Frazer lowered his voice, and after a few preliminary remarks, launched out on the queer story. The boys listened almost as eagerly as the captain. In the snug security which now encompassed them, the strange adventure of the secret vaults seemed remote and incredible; on Frazer's lips it sounded like the recital of some familiar fairy tale.

The captain heard him out in silence, and it was not till Marchmont added his testimony that his astonishment broke out.

'Why, surely it can't be possible,' he exclaimed. 'Such substances are believed to exist in the stars, but as a source of energy the thing you describe would be colossal.'

He mused for a bit.

'You're quite certain of the abnormal density? That alone is proof of something absolutely novel.'

For answer Frazer went to the ship's laboratory and produced the wooden box. The captain picked it up, then opened it and looked at the small black fragment in amazement.

'Why, it's unbelievably heavy!' he cried.

Dicky got up and extinguished the lamps. Immediately in the dim cabin the weird red glow began to radiate from the box. Captain Frazer started back.

'By Jove,' he said hoarsely, 'there's something here that'll shake the scientific world to its foundations. I can see no possible explanation except Marchmont's. This must be the parent substance of all our radio-active elements. It's absolutely epoch-making!'

The boys were delighted at his enthusiasm, and listened with the utmost interest while he talked of the various theories of atomic structure currently held and of the possible bearing upon them of their find. It was only when he realized that it was midnight and that the boys were still weak from their privations that Captain Frazer brought the discussion to an end. Just as he was leaving them for the night to go to his old cabin on deck, Frazer asked,

'What about Count Silberstein? Shall we tell him about this, or keep it dark?'

'You must decide that among you, but personally I think you should let him into the know. You can trust him as you would one of yourselves.'

'Yes, I think, considering what we owe to him, it would only be decent.'

So when on the following afternoon a tall, spare, steel-framed man came to visit them, the story was told once more. But even without Captain Frazer's reassurance, the boys would have had no hesitation in making a confidant of this grey-haired ex-submarine officer, who captured them at once by the way in which he belittled their indebtedness.

'Except for your father's chivalry,' he said to Frazer, 'I should have drowned many years ago. He came into the water after me himself. Ever since then I have hoped for an opportunity.'

On the subject of the discovery he had little to say, but he was obviously impressed, and his reticence seemed to be due to a disinclination to pry into affairs not his own. When he rose to return to the *Wismar*, which was moored on the other side of the floe, he shook hands again with the boys.

'There's only one thing I could have enjoyed more than hearing your adventures,' he said, 'and that is, being with you myself.'

'And I wish he had, too,' said Dicky when the door closed.

CHAPTER XXII

HOME ONCE MORE

DESPITE all their efforts at secrecy, the boys' story leaked out in part, and when they arrived in London they found themselves besieged by an army of reporters. In vain they tried to shake off the enemy; they were pursued everywhere, held up in the street, flattered in cafés, almost pulled out of bed in the morning by the importunate host. At last Frazer, acting upon his father's advice, wrote a brief, unvarnished statement of what had happened and sent it to the press; the summary was complete except for the mention of the find, and was published extensively the next day. But their troubles were not over. In some unknown way a rumour had got about of an extraordinary discovery in the Arctic, and the boys were more harassed than ever; until one day Peter, coming out of a hairdresser's, found a man at his side. The familiar note-book was just appearing when Peter in a sudden mood of irresponsibility drew the man into a side street and pitched him a yarn that made his eyes grow round.

'Diamonds as big as footballs, whole stacks of 'em,' he concluded in a whisper.

Next morning he was horrified to see his joke in the headlines of one of the lesser dailies, 'Enormous Gems Discovered in the Far North,' and was soundly rated by Frazer for his audacity. But somehow or other the hoax had the effect of sapping the curiosity of the press, and thereafter the boys were left in comparative peace.

The brigantine had been left in Norway for an overhaul, and the boys were still the guests of Count Silberstein, but the dreaded day was coming when they must finally break up, each to return to his own sphere. In the meantime Captain Frazer had sent pieces of the glowing mineral to half a dozen eminent scientists, and was awaiting replies. The days dragged heavily for the boys in their state of unaccustomed leisure and luxury, and soon Tony and Peter were longing once more for the far distant pack-ice and a life of freedom and activity. As Dicky said, it took the zest out of things to know when you woke up that, even if you didn't stir, there was no danger of freezing, or starving, or drowning. Only one occupation was slow to pall on the boys, and that was the consumption of fruit and green vegetables. Never a meal was begun but what the table groaned beneath its load of grape-fruit and oranges, strawberries and pears, or tomatoes and fresh salad. But

the prime treat of all was simply boiled potatoes, a dish for which they had longed more than for anything, and whose virtues burst upon them afresh at every onslaught.

But presently answers to Captain Frazer's letters began to arrive, establishing beyond a doubt the enormous importance of the discovery. For the most part these reports consisted of unintelligible mathematical formulae, but the writers took no pains to conceal their wonder and excitement, and in most cases expressed the liveliest curiosity as to the conditions surrounding the find. When the list was complete, Frazer called a meeting of the boys, their last gathering prior to disbandment.

'It seems,' he began, 'that Marchmont hit pretty near the truth, right from the first. These letters all agree on the essentials so far as I can make out. The substance is a new element of higher atomic weight than anything hitherto known, and is radioactive to a degree far beyond that of radium. I'll read you what has been pronounced on the subject.'

He did so, taking up the sheets one after another, and skipping the mathematics. The concluding paragraphs of the last letter he read slowly and with emphasis.

'As to the monetary value of the substance, it is

impossible to say anything except that it will be very large. Radium has a market value of about half a million sterling per ounce, and this element can hardly be worth less. On such a count, the tiny scrap of dull black material which is before me as I write would fetch something like ten million pounds. It is scarcely credible.

‘The fascinating fields of research opened up by the discovery of this substance, and the light which it may throw on the ultimate structure of the atom, I need not comment upon at present. There is another side to the matter. Of late years the curative properties of radium in certain diseases have been well established. I see no reason why this new element should not be utilized in the same way; in fact there seems to be every reason to believe that its curative properties will far exceed those of the better known substance, and, when its application is thoroughly understood, that it will prove an inestimable boon to humanity.’

Dicky sighed.

‘It’s a bit overwhelming,’ he said.

‘Why, it means that we’re all millionaires,’ cried Peter.

‘That’s precisely what I want to discuss with you,’ Frazer remarked thoughtfully.

They looked at him.

'Discuss becoming millionaires?' exclaimed Marchmont with a touch of disdain.

'No, discuss *not* becoming millionaires.'

They waited.

'You see, I've had access to this letter for some days, and it set me thinking. If this stuff is to make multi-millionaires of us, then the dearer it is the better. If it is to cure diseases and be a boon to mankind, then the cheaper it is the better. Two opposing principles. What are we going to do about it?'

He paused but no one replied.

'The thing lies entirely in our hands. No one outside of this room knows the position of the land; in fact, I don't suppose any of you could write down the latitude and longitude to within a degree or so. And after all, the lump of the stuff which we brought home is only a tiny fraction of what is lying up there, lying there ready for the use of the whole world. All we did was to find it.'

'Finding's keeping,' said Peter.

Frazer laughed. 'In that case Count Silberstein owns the lot of us, lock, stock, barrel, *and* discovery. Where does he come in?'

'Quite true,' Peter agreed ruefully.

'I don't think any of us would like to think of

a person dying because he or she was unable to pay for a special treatment. And that's what will happen if we insist on becoming multi-millionaires.'

He paused again.

'At first I thought of presenting the thing to the nation, but considering what the Count has done for us it doesn't seem fair. Don't think I'm trying to lay down the law. Tony and Marchmont had more to do with the business than any of us, and what they say is going to count.'

'What is your scheme then?' asked Dicky.

'I propose,' said Frazer, 'to hand over the whole thing to an international body, the League of Nations say, in exchange for a comparatively small sum, stipulating that the stuff should not become an article of commerce, but should be freely available to all who require it for fighting disease, or for research. The sum which we receive would be divided equally between us, and would be big enough for my own share to put the *Widgeon* in commission again. What do you think?'

'I'm with you,' said Tony.

'And I,' said Marchmont.

Dicky shook his head. 'I'll withhold my consent, unless you grant another condition.'

'What is it?' asked Frazer.

'Up north yonder,' said Dicky with a wave of his huge fist, 'we began calling the stuff *Frazerite*. Somehow or other that has been dropped, and in one of these letters a johnny has the cheek to suggest a suitable name from the Latin. Latin indeed! A precious long way Latin would have taken us towards the discovery. No. There's only one name for the stuff so far as I'm concerned, and that is *Frazerite*. If you agree to that, I'll back you in the rest.'

'Hear, hear,' cried Peter.

Unwillingly, and under heavy pressure from the four of them, Frazer gave way.

'All right,' he said at last, 'but it's an awful thing to have tagged on to one.'

They fell silent.

'Is that all, is that the end?' asked Tony, thinking of the months gone by. His words cast a gloom upon them.

'I'm afraid it is,' said Dicky despondently.

Frazer moved restlessly in his chair.

'There's only one other point to mention,' he said with a slight smile showing beneath his moustache. 'The gov'nor has been asked by a scientific society to take the *Widgeon* down to the Pacific to study the growth of coral.'

He stopped and looked from one face to another.

‘If you would care about it, he’d like you all to come.’

He was going to say more, but his voice was drowned in the wild yell of delight about him.

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